

## Living with Hope in Trying Times

Satish Kumar in conversation

with Jane Goodall

Omega Institute in New York State gave me the opportunity to have this conversation with Jane Goodall, who is an outstanding champion of ecological sustainability and social harmony. She is a UN Messenger of Peace and a protector of wild chimpanzees.

**Satish:** We have been through this terrible pandemic, this Covid crisis, all over the world. What is the cause of this pandemic? And what can we do about it?

Jane: Well, the reason that we have this pandemic and these so-called zoonotic diseases, diseases that come from animals, is our absolute disrespect of animals. We have brought it on ourselves. We move into their habitat, we hunt them, kill them, eat them, we traffic them around the world, we sell them in wildlife markets all over the world. We crowd billions of them into these horribly cruel factory farms to be eaten for meat. These bad conditions make it very easy for a pathogen like a virus to jump from an animal to a human, and when that happens the virus may be able to bond with a cell in the human body and it may create a new zoonotic disease such as COVID-19. So we've brought this pandemic on ourselves.

**Satish: That is absolutely right. Our impingement and encroachment on wildlife through our expanding farming activities has also diminished biodiversity. Animals that we have been rearing in their millions, such as cows, pigs, chickens, dogs, cats and horses, have reduced the space for wildlife. In addition, we have built roads, railways, airports, seaports and megacities. Our human footprint on Planet Earth is very heavy. We live in the age of the Anthropocene and that is one of the causes of this pandemic, as well as climate change.**

**Climate change is also a kind of pandemic, and there's no vaccination for climate change! What can we do to address these problems?**

Jane: Covid crisis and climate crisis are linked. I called COP26 a 'cop-out'! At all these different COPs, politicians make many promises, commitments and pledges, but how many of them are kept? Very few! At the Paris COP15, all the nations got together and said, we're going to curb our emissions by this much, but the only ones that actually managed to fulfil their commitment were the ones that sent their dirty industries to India or China. Now India and China won't take them any more. So, good for them. Nations of the world have to take action to mitigate climate change now – we can't wait. Carbon emissions must be curtailed urgently.

**Satish: Exactly! But politicians seem to think that the solution is technology. They think that, through technology, they will find a way to continue this industrial civilisation, so that there can be business as usual. Do you think technology is the solution?**

Jane: Well, technology certainly plays a part – clean, green, renewable energy with solar, wind and water – although wind power has its problems, because it's affecting the birds. More important is to reduce our ecological footprint. We rear billions of animals in factory farms, and they all have to be fed. Huge areas of rainforest are destroyed to grow the grain to feed them. Masses of fossil fuel, with all its carbon dioxide emissions, is used to get the food to the animals. Then the animals have to be slaughtered to bring meat to the table. How much energy and water is used in that process? In some parts of the world, water is getting scarcer and scarcer because of extended droughts due to climate change. And all the animals are producing methane gas through their digestion. Industrial agriculture is one of the main contributors of greenhouse gases. And then every one of these animals is so cruelly treated. It is so inhuman! All those animals are individuals. They can all feel fear and terror and pain, and the scale of suffering is unimaginable. So the solution is not just technology! The solution is to reduce human consumption and human impact on the natural world.

We have to get rid of factory farming. We are using huge amounts of pesticides and herbicides, which are causing loss of biodiversity and

killing the soil that we all depend on. All of us have to think about our own environmental footprint. An awful lot of people have so much more than they need.

**Satish: Well, what you are saying is that we need to change our lifestyle and produce less stuff and produce better-quality products rather than huge quantities of shoddy goods! We need to minimise waste and eliminate pollution.**

Jane: Yes, we certainly have to change the way we live, and what we buy, and what we wear, and where it comes from, and whether it harms the environment. But at the same time we've got to alleviate poverty. When you're really poor, you've just got to survive, and if that means cutting down the forest to grow food, then you do it. If you're in an urban area, you're going to buy the cheapest food. If you are poor, you can't afford to ask, did it hurt the environment? Was it cruel to animals? Is it cheap because of unfair wages? So we've got to alleviate poverty and become eco-friendly at the same time. These two things are interrelated.

**Satish: Yes. Social justice and environmental justice go hand in hand.**

**You have written this wonderful book, The Book of Hope. How do you maintain hope? We are surrounded by all these big problems like the pandemic, climate change and poverty. You still maintain this deep hope in your heart. How do you do that?**

Jane: Well, first of all, let me explain what I mean by hope. Hope isn't something passive. I see us now as in a very dark tunnel, and at the end of this dark tunnel is a little star of light, and that's hope. Well, we don't just sit at our end of the tunnel and hope that light will come to us. No. We have to roll up our sleeves, crawl under and climb over all the obstacles between us and that star of light. So hope is about action. If we lose hope, that's the big disaster. If we lose hope, why bother? Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die! When you have hope, you take action, and you see that you are making a difference, and that makes you feel good, and if you feel good, you want to feel better, so you want to do more, and then other people get inspired, so it's a sort of outward spiral, gathering in more people as it goes.

Although we're surrounded by doom and gloom, there are also so many amazing things happening. Recently an absolute landmark decision was made in Ecuador, where the highest Constitutional Court of Law upheld the rights of Nature. The court told the government that they had to remove all of their mining concessions from places that were protected. And that's a big step forward. That gives me hope! If the whole world would respect the rights of Nature, what a different world it would be! Every major culture has the same golden rule: do to others as you would have them do to you. Supposing we all followed that rule, wouldn't it be a fabulous world?

**Satish: Absolutely. Human rights and the rights of Nature must come together, because humans and Nature are not separate. We are Nature. When we think that Nature's separate from us, then we dominate Nature, we try to conquer Nature, we subjugate Nature. And we do that at our own peril.**

Jane: New Zealand also granted rights to rivers. We talk about human rights, and the tragedy is that almost every day there are examples of human rights being disregarded and abused. But even more important than human rights is human responsibility: our responsibility to people living in poverty, our responsibility to animals, our responsibility to Nature.

One of my greatest reasons for hope is the young people, because once they understand the problems, they take action – they just go with it. In our Roots & Shoots programme, they choose projects that they feel deeply about, to help people, to help animals, to help the environment, because it's all interrelated. Young people are changing the world, they're changing their parents and they're changing their grandparents!

**Satish: Young people are a great source of hope for me as well. Young people like Greta Thunberg and tens of thousands of boys and girls around the world are involved in Fridays For Future. They are on the march! They are saying, we don't want to have a way of life that pollutes and causes climate crisis: we want to have ecological, sustainable and regenerative ways of life.**

Jane: Young people as well as people at large need to establish spiritual connection with the natural world. We need to encourage outdoor education. Schools need to tell young people about climate change and about all the things that humankind is doing that are harmful to Nature.

**Satish: We need to learn from Nature, learn in Nature and learn about Nature. Nature is the greatest teacher. But what do you mean by ‘spiritual connection with Nature’? Generally we talk about looking after the planet, looking after people, improving environmental conservation, and social harmony. Could you expand on this idea of spiritual connection with Nature?**

Jane: When I am out in Nature, particularly in the rainforest, and when I’m on my own in Nature, I feel that I am an integral part of it. I remember being out in the forest one day. There were no chimps around, but there were birds and insects and beautiful foliage. I thought to myself, well, this is the great spiritual power of Nature that I feel all around me, I think there’s a spark of that spiritual power in each one of us, and because we’re human we like to name everything, so we call it a soul or a spirit, and I thought to myself, a little spark of that spiritual power is in every single plant and in every single insect and every single animal. So, if we human beings have souls, then all those other beings also have souls. Nature is alive. I felt the spiritual power of Nature. Being out in Nature gives you this amazing

feeling of being one with the Universe. That is what I call our spiritual connection with Nature.

**Satish: But we live in the age of the Anthropocene, in a human-made world. People living in cities have little connection with Nature and whatever Nature they have is all human-made. There is very little wild in the cities. How can people connect with Nature when they are so urbanised?**

Jane: We have to revision and redesign our cities. One way forward is urban tree planting, because when you plant trees you bring Nature into cities. With trees come the birds and the insects. If you go through a big city, and if you go through the affluent areas, you will see nice tree-lined streets and there are gorgeous gardens and parks, and then you come to an area where it's all cement, concrete and grim. That's where the poor people live. We have to work in these areas and bring Nature there. There was an experiment in Chicago. They took two areas of high crime and they started to green one of them. They planted trees and flowers there. You know, the crime level there dropped dramatically. Then they quickly did it for the other one, where the crime level hadn't dropped. Again they witnessed profound changes for the better in that area as well. We need to green our cities. In Japan they have invented this thing called Forest Bathing. City people spend time out in the forest and experience the healing power of Nature. Doctors are prescribing time in Nature, because

Nature is therapeutic, Nature heals. So let us bring Nature back in our cities. Nature and culture should surely live together.

**Satish: At the moment, there's a lot of eco-anxiety, a lot of anger and depression among environmental activists and among the urban population in general. Forest bathing and bringing Nature into the cities is one of the solutions to heal eco-anxiety.**

Jane: Well, that is part of the solution, and the other part is constructive and positive action. I've had so many people come to me and say, I look around the world and I'm just depressed. I can't do anything. Well, that is the state of hopelessness. You can always do something! Is there anything that particularly bothers you? Do you dislike the litter in the street? Are you worried about homelessness? Are you worried about the stray dogs or cats? Well, think what you can do, get some friends together, take action. You can make a difference. Never lose your hope. Positive action is the antidote to depression!

During my travels I met so many wonderful people doing incredible things. I saw so many places that had been totally destroyed, but were restored by conservation activists and volunteers. Given a chance, Nature will reclaim and Nature will recover. There was one Roots & Shoots group in a city and they noticed that along the kerb there were little spaces, and so they put seeds there, and it was amazing. The plants came up all the way along this city street, the flowers were blooming, and it was beautiful.

**Satish:** You have dedicated your life to saving chimpanzees, and there are many other conservationists who are protecting rhinos, tigers and elephants, but we also have to take care of the little species – the insects, the flowers, the birds and many other small creatures who live in jungles as well as in the cities.

Jane: Yes, because these small creatures are actually the foundation of everything else. But our industrial agriculture, where they use all these pesticides and herbicides, is killing off the insects, and that includes the pollinators. What is going to happen if we lose all the pollinators? Most of our food is pollinated by bees, wasps and other insects. So all of these little creatures are really important. One of the tragedies of our time is that, with industrial farming, we're destroying the biological composition of the soil. By cutting down the trees and killing the soil with artificial fertilisers, we are upsetting the natural balance of life. We need to go back to small-scale farming, regenerative farming, permaculture and agro-ecology. That is what we need to do. We know what to do to make the world a better place, but do we have the will to do it?

**Satish:** Yes, you and I know, but we are a small minority. If you look at big business and the big corporations that are in charge of industrial farming, that are involved in genetic engineering, that produce heavy machinery, artificial fertilisers and artificial intelligence, they don't seem to know. Yet they are dominating food production. And

**governments around the world don't seem to know either. So how are we going to take this message out there into the world of factory farms and agribusiness? How are we going to convince them that we need to produce food without harming biodiversity and wildlife?**

Jane: Well, let us start with the good news. There are some big corporations out there that are now actually changing. They're not just greenwashing. If you're interested, there's a new book out by Paul Polman, who was the CEO of Unilever for ten years. He has written a book called Net Positive, in which he explains how imaginative businesses can thrive by giving more than they take – yes, giving more than they take!

I was talking to the CEO of a big corporation just a few weeks ago and he said, "Jane, for the last eight years I've been really working to make my business ethically, environmentally and socially responsible." He said there were three reasons. "First, I saw the writing on the wall, that we're using the natural resources faster than Nature can replenish them, and if we go on with business as usual that's the end. Second, consumer pressure. People are beginning to demand products that are made ethically. Young people and children, too, are telling their parents: I don't want that, it's got palm oil from an unsustainable plantation. I don't want that, it's got factory farmed animal in it." Then he said, "The thing that really tipped the balance for me was about ten years ago. My little girl came back from school, she was eight years old, and she said: Daddy,

they're telling me that what you do is hurting the planet. That's not true is it, Daddy? Because it's my planet."

**Satish: That is good news, but the world at large is still following biologically and ecologically destructive practices, and the European Union is giving subsidies to such big and destructive farms. In America and Australia megafarms of industrial scale are ruling the roost. You and I are talking about family farms and small-scale farms. How are we going to change the big wide world? Are you still hopeful? Time is running out.**

Jane: Well, Satish, if you think of the changes that have happened in the last ten years, they are significant. If you think of the awareness that has grown, even during the pandemic, that is remarkable. Think of the number of people who now realise that we need a different relationship with Nature, we need a more sustainable, greener economy, we've got to stop thinking that the be all and end all is the annual growth of GDP at the expense of the future. That number is incredibly big, and that is encouraging. Such changes are going to be the catalysts. They give me hope.

Yes, of course we're up against a mighty wall, but, if we give up and lose hope and say, "Oh well, it's no good, nothing can be done, nothing will change," then we've lost. So we just have to encourage more and more people, especially young people, to embrace regenerative agriculture and sustainable economy. I believe that the next generation is going to be very

different. I am not giving up!

**Satish: I agree with you that without hope there's no way forward. To be an activist, you have to be an optimist. If you're a pessimist, you can't be an activist, and without being an activist you can't change the world.**

**Your message of hope is so inspiring.**

Jane: The thing that I found doesn't work is putting blame and guilt on people. If you're approaching high-ranking officials or CEOs, and you're telling them that they're bad people and don't understand what they're doing, that they have to change and they must change, that is not a constructive approach. At that point they won't listen, because they're thinking, how can I refute it, why should this person tell me that I'm doing everything wrong? But if you can find a way to get in there and open their hearts, then you have a chance to change them, because real change comes from within.

**Satish: I agree. Our activism has to be driven by love – not by anger, not by fear, not by anxiety, not by preaching, but by love.**

Jane: Yes, that's where the hope is. I always give people the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they're really ignorant, maybe they haven't understood. Some businesspeople have been brought up in this tough business

environment, in this cut-throat world, and they haven't really thought about what they're doing, so to get them to see the light is a big task! You've got to have a feeling for people. You've got to have love in your heart and try to find a connection with their heart and help them to understand that caring for Nature is in their best interest. Then they'll feel better and they will change. This is the nonviolent way of transforming the world.

\* \* \*

An edited version of this article was first published in *Resurgence & Ecologist*, May/June 2022, issue 332.

To listen to the conversation between Satish Kumar and Jane Goodall visit: <https://www.eomega.org/videos/living-hope-trying-times>

For information about Omega Institute and membership details please visit [www.eomega.org](http://www.eomega.org)

Satish Kumar is Editor Emeritus at The Resurgence Trust.

Jane Goodall's *Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for an Endangered Planet*, co-authored with Douglas Abrams, is reviewed in *Resurgence & Ecologist* Issue 332. [www.janegoodall.org.uk](http://www.janegoodall.org.uk)