

# 12 QUESTIONS TO TAUKONDJO SEM SHIKONGO

## 1. From your point of view, what are today's most pressing environmental problems?

Continued loss of biodiversity and degradation of our ecosystems along projected changes in climate are key environmental problems that have visible effects and consequences in relation to poverty alleviation, food, water and energy security, and human health. Alongside this is the alarming rate at which we are losing languages and the real meaning of words. With that we continue the degradation of our means of communication and abilities to relate with each other and the ecosystems around us and the biodiversity that they support.

## 2. When looking at potential improvements in our environment, what gives you hope?

The concepts of social justice and equitable benefit-sharing taking its rightful place along conservation and sustainable use. Even though they are accepted and understood so slowly. We need to move forward decisively and ensure that local people benefit from their conservation efforts and from the natural resources we want them to protect. To bring about the above there is need to go within ourselves to reflect on the need for change as it pertains to our personal worldview, assumptions (culture), beliefs and values. We need to do this if we are to seriously address biodiversity loss, climate change, land degradation and the host of other environmental challenges facing us and through that ensure our sustained survival.

## 3. Is there a particular environmental policy reform you admire the most?

The earth is not ours – it is a treasure we hold in trust for our children's grandchildren. This was emphasised in the Brundtland report *Our common future* and led to the concept inter- and intragenerational equity being ingrained in the concept of sustainable development as encapsulated in the many principles that came out of the *Rio Earth Summit*. This was a landmark piece of policy that changed the thinking about environment and development fundamentally.

## 4. Which trend in environmental policy and politics do you consider an aberration?

When the shepherd becomes the wolf. The men and women at the forefront of environmental policy and politics are the first line of defence for our continued sustained survival: when greed overpowers them through the love of power it becomes difficult for all involved. This is happening at all levels and in all places – in government institutions, in private business, in multi-national companies, in religious institutions or in a village setting. We need to shift from the love of power towards passion in

what we do driven by the power of love. This is easier said than done as it requires change from within. Today when one approaches the topic of going within, scientists view this as esoteric because it involves feeling subjectively as opposed to thinking objectively. However, if that internal shift isn't made, greed will destroy what we've been entrusted to safeguard for the benefit of future generations.

## 5. Why do environmental research?

For me environmental research is studying the changes (the what) that are taking place in the natural and human environments as a result of human activity, either to understand these changes (the why) or to seek solutions (the how). We need to understand what is and why it is before we can seek to change that which is.

## 6. What has your experience been when it comes to transferring scientific insights into practice?

The environment is dynamic and influenced by human culture. Human culture (emotional, intellectual, spiritual, psychological and physiological) in turn is shaped by the prevailing diverse environmental conditions. Therefore, one has to be aware that there is no one size fits all for environmental challenges. We have a diversity of cultures as well as languages and therefore a diversity of environmental challenges and a diversity of potential responses that can emanate from two schools of thought – the structured reality of western thought or the other-structured reality of that which is not western thought.

## 7. What field of research in the environmental sciences do you find most exciting?

Indigenous ecology – knowing what was done in the distant and ancient pasts and why, and looking at the relevance of that knowledge system born out of experience and empirical observation of the natural laws and universal laws is applied and can be applied to the challenges we face today.

## 8. Can you name any person or event that has had a particular influence on your commitment to environmental issues?

I come from a diverse academic background which has been influenced by many elders from different continents, such as my mother and father or my late grandfather and grandmother amongst others. My grandfather was a chief and he and his fellow chiefs decreed that a particular area near our village must remain pristine wilderness. This was way before the *Rio Conference*.

## 9. What knowledge about the environment would you like to pass on to young people?

What we must transfer to the youth is that we are all one. The land and the people are one. I am because of you. I am because we are. We must balance that with *cogito ergo sum* – I think therefore I am, you think therefore I think, we think therefore we are. To choose one is to choose confusion. What makes us strong is our differences, the contradictions and not the similarities. The same applies to the environment, the more diverse the ecosystem, the more diverse the species, the more diverse the genes.

#### 10. As a person concerned with environmental and especially climate communication, what contradictions do you face in everyday life?

The rules that we have set for ourselves are forcing us to not change because we have cast these rules in stone, yet we are attempting to regulate dynamic living systems interacting with their abiotic counterparts and therefore risk, uncertainty, predictability and control become near impossible. The challenge is that we always do what we always did and just name it differently and we hope to get a different result and when we don't we go to the drawing board to look at what is the problem and how to solve the problem without looking at the why and addressing the why.

#### 11. What are you reading at the moment?

*The Courage to Trust – A Guide to Building Deep and Lasting Relationship* by Cynthia L. Wall, and *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

#### 12. Apart from the ones we've raised here, what is the most important question of our day?

The current global COVID-19 pandemic pertinent to us all right now, which is forcing us to reflect, to take a moment, to do some things differently. At the same time, under the *Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)* the *Global Biodiversity Framework* is being developed and negotiated by the Parties. It is hoped that it will be ambitious, transformative, effective and practical as well as balanced. It provides yet again another opportunity for humanity to do the right thing for the right reasons. The big question is will we? The future will tell.



#### **Taukondjo Sem Shikongo,**

Senior Programme Manager for the *Access and Benefit-Sharing Unit*, Secretariat of the *Convention on Biological Diversity*, Montreal, Canada.

Formerly, director for tourism and gaming, Ministry of Environment and Tourism, Namibia. Africa's Chief Negotiator on the international *Protocol on Access and Benefit-Sharing*, *United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity*. Lecturer in biodiversity research and management, University of Namibia and Namibia University of Science and Technology, both Windhoek, Namibia. Senior Adjunct Professor for environmental studies and management at the International University of Management, Windhoek, Namibia.

© 2022 by the author; licensee oekom.  
This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).  
<https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.31.1.3>

#### TAUKONDJO SEM SHIKONGO ...

... is an extraordinary conservation giant. He combines his personal story of being a traditional leader and a scientist with his passion for people and nature.

Sem grew up in a village in northern Namibia. Herding his grandfather's cattle was his first lesson in nature conservation. There he learned to love the integral linkages between people and nature. His early childhood is the foundation for his understanding of how people and nature are interconnected in Africa. It is the basis for his daily work, which places African communities at the centre of the conservation narrative. He understands that the African people, and other local and indigenous communities around the globe, are the solution to the conservation challenges. According to Sem, most Africans and other local and indigenous communities remain connected to nature, which provides a premise on which to build conservation, sustainable use and benefit-sharing interventions.

Sem is passionately advocating to make Africans and global local and indigenous communities the focus of a positive conservation agenda. He has dedicated his career to unlocking benefits from local resources for the local communities by playing a central role in negotiating the *Access and Benefit Sharing* mechanism at the Secretariat of the *Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD)*. He now heads the implementation of the *Nagoya Protocol* at the CBD Secretariat in Mon-

*He combines his personal story of being a traditional leader and a scientist with his passion for people and nature.*

tréal, Canada. His conviction is that local people around the world need to be able to accrue direct benefits from their local resources and from inventions that are based on their traditional knowledge. Local communities need to benefit from biodiversity resources under their custodianship, and local conservation efforts need to be equitably supported and remunerated.

Sem grew up during apartheid in Namibia and South Africa. He was imprisoned at a young age and learned about injustice and systemic societal flaws. He also learned about resistance and constructively building a new future. Just after Namibian Independence in 1990, Sem was amongst the new, young rising leaders in the environmental sector during the formative years of Namibia. He worked most of his career in the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, and always took on lecturing responsibilities in Namibia's post-secondary education institutions to share his knowledge with the next generation of conservation professionals. He was the Namibian Chief Negotiator to the *CBD* and to the *United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification*.

Sem is a role model for many young Namibians, pursuing a passion and demonstrating national and international influence on a conservation approach dear to his convictions. He is a shrewd negotiator and full of surprises. Proud of his roots, he combines his background as a traditional leader and a global conservation personality to advance a community-based conservation agenda. He is one of a kind.

*Juliane Zeidler*, Country Director, World Wildlife Fund Namibia (WWF), Windhoek, Namibia