9. Introduction to Part II

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LAST STAND FOR NATURE

In any conflict, the last thing a dominant power wants is for the outside world to know the cost of victory. They criminalize and dehumanize their opposition, downplay the importance of the struggle, obscure the number of victims and undermine media coverage.

This is particularly true of the battle for the global environment, which goes underreported because it often takes place in remote regions that are expensive or dangerous to reach. If disputes are covered at all, they are usually portrayed as disparate, distant, low-intensity challenges to “development” and the establishment.

But gather those cases together – as we have done in this part of the book – and a pattern starts to emerge of a war against nature on many fronts. Tally the deaths and it becomes clear the toll is higher than many conflict zones. Then add names, portraits, profiles and family stories and there is no avoiding a discomfiting connection with those on the front lines of ecological crisis.

That was what I learned from *The Guardian*’s year-long Defenders project, which I helped to oversee and report on during my first year as the paper’s global environment editor. The experience also convinced me of the need to make global stories personal, to collaborate more widely, to disrupt business-as-usual journalism, and to look for creative ways to break out of the “environment media ghetto”. Some of these approaches might apply to wider battles over the climate and other issues of global importance.

I admit my feelings were mixed when I first took over Defenders coverage for *The Guardian*. That was July 2017. A long-time foreign correspondent in Asia and Latin America, I had just moved back to London for the first time in 22 years to take my current post. My overriding priority was the climate crisis and the collapse of biodiversity, so when I was told that my duties included a series on the killings of people who were defending their land and environment, I was sympathetic but wary. Back then, it seemed a remote concern. I realized later how wrong that was.

But I was also pleased to focus on a topic that would show that courage, fear, desperation, anger, love and other human feelings are part of the environment story. The primary challenge for a journalist is to make a subject feel personal. Without that, the science becomes abstract, global issues seem too huge to grasp, and it becomes difficult to relate to far-off places and other species. Without that, the “environment” slips too easily into an elite pigeonhole for academics, policymakers and predominantly middle-class white people, when it should be recognized as the main driver of inequality, conflict and injustice. Without that, most people don’t realize this underlies politics and economics. This is not just another subject; it is a prism through which to see everything else.

It is also a way to explain much of the world’s violence – against people as well as against nature. During the year of the project, I talked to the families and friends of dozens of victims: Aysin and Ali Büyüknöhtü, the Turkish beekeepers and environmental defenders who were murdered for challenging marble quarries; Efigenia Vásquez, a radio and video journalist of the indigenous Kokonuko people in Colombia, who was fatally shot as she attempted to cover her community’s attempt to regain land lost to a farm owned by a former general; Samuel Loware, a Ugandan ranger who narrowly survived an attack by poachers; Maria do Socorro Costa Silva, a descendant of rebel slaves now suffering death threats as she battles one of the world’s biggest alumina refineries in the Amazon; Nonhle Mbuthuma, the Amadiba activist who overcame the death of a fellow campaigner to win a high court battle against a titanium mine on South Africa’s Wild Coast; Fatima Babu, the Indian anti-pollution activist who helped to close down a giant copper smelter after the massacre of more than a dozen protesters in Tamil Nadu; Isela González, the former nurse who devotes herself to indigenous land rights in Mexico; and Ramón Bedoya, a 19-year-old Colombian *campesino* (rural farmer) who wants to create a biodiversity zone on the edge of a palm oil plantation – a project that led to the assassination of his father. These and many others are risking their lives for their land and our Earth, defending forests, rivers, coastlines and wildlife as far afield as the Coral Triangle, Sierra Madre, Pondoland, Anatolia, Mindanao, Tamil Nadu, the Brazilian Amazon and the Ugandan savanna.

In 2017, more than 200 Earth defenders were murdered while trying to protect their land and environment, according to non-governmental organization (NGO) Global Witness, which partnered *The Guardian* on the project. Last year (2019), the number was 212 – a record. A longer-term study by the University of Queensland found that killings of environmental and land defenders have doubled over the past 15 years to reach levels usually associated with war zones. The paper, published in *Nature Sustainability*, found that 1558 people in 50 nations were killed between 2002 and 2017. Almost all the killings occurred in the countries that scored lowest for corruption, fundamen-

tal rights, government powers, transparency and legal oversight. These are also areas of great natural abundance. Most of the deaths were related to agriculture or mining in tropical and subtropical countries, particularly in Central and South America.

Brazil, the biggest Amazon forest nation has been the most murderous for defenders almost every year since the tallies began, though it was surpassed in 2018 by the Philippines. Other hotspots are Colombia (another Amazonian nation), the Democratic Republic of Congo (home to Africa's biggest tropical forest) and Mexico, where the government's approval for mining and farming concessions in indigenous territory has dramatically increased the death toll in recent years.

Most victims are compelled to fight by circumstance rather than conviction. Their struggle is existential. They need land for food, water to drink, air to breathe, animals to hunt, forests to tap for medicine. Only occasionally – usually when there is a chance of NGO support or media coverage – do they talk about their contribution to the climate or biodiversity. For them, the problems are personal, at least to begin with.

Although the campaigns often start locally and accidentally, several defenders saw themselves caught up in a bigger fight for the natural world: “We didn't realize this at first, but it's global”, says Turkish forest defender Tuğba Günel. “If you want to protect the environment, you are treated as a terrorist. It's everywhere now”. There is a similar refrain from Fatima Babu in India who recently saw her 24-year campaign against a copper smelter explode into violence with the police slaughter of 13 protesters – one of an increasing number of environment-related massacres. “Something is happening in the world. Activists are being branded as terrorists”, she says. “This phenomenon of destroying people and the planet for profit is not just happening in India. It's across the globe. We need to come together for future generations. We need to be strong and courageous and hold on to our values”.

The majority of the defenders are from indigenous groups and poor black communities, who have been pushed over decades or centuries to the fringes of society. Not coincidentally, that is where nature is most abundant, where resources remain untapped, where the law often serves as a tool for exploitation rather than social stability.

Once isolated communities now find themselves on the front line. Like many endangered species, indigenous communities have been pushed from coastlines and fertile plains to remote mountain slopes and deep forests. Now even these areas are threatened by plantations, loggers and mining companies, who are granted concessions by governments that put business ahead of people. With nowhere left to flee, the local communities are forced to fight. They usually do this in the courts or the media. Defenders tend to be poor, outnumbered and outgunned, so armed struggle is rarely an option.

Yet, they are often criminalized, labelled terrorists or portrayed by their enemies as anti-development. Many of the killings are linked to government security forces, particularly in the Philippines, which is the most dangerous country in Asia for activists. In Latin America, gangs or hired assassins are a bigger threat.

Impunity is a major problem. Defenders are often cheated of land rights by corrupt lawmakers and local politicians. When they resist, they are criminalized. When they are killed, nobody gets punished. The *Nature Sustainability* study found that only 10 per cent of defender murders result in a conviction, which is very low compared to the 43 per cent average for all global homicides. Many murders are not even investigated.

This is a challenge for capacity and governance that the United Nations Environment Programme has tried to address, but there is little it can do without the support of state governments – many of which are moving away from global cooperation and pushing populist, nationalist agendas that favour extractive industries.

A new generation of political “strongmen” – Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Narendra Modi in India, Donald Trump in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and several others – are committed to eroding the legal protections that environmental campaigners and indigenous groups are able to use to hold back mines, farms, factories and major infrastructure projects such as hydroelectric dams and roads. In many cases they have accused activists of colluding with foreign interests to slow economic development.

Such extreme nationalist leaders should not be blithely dismissed as populists. They are the hired guns of the industries working against the Paris Accord and other international agreements that aim to prevent further environmental catastrophes, which hit the poorest hardest. Their “anti-globalism” is first and foremost anti-nature and anti-future. An extraction-first approach may bring economic benefits in the short term, as campaign donors clear more forests, open up plantations and dig more mines – but the profits are concentrated and short-lived while the environmental stress is shared and long-lasting.

The great fear climate scientists have is that a warming planet could create feedback loops that will make everything much worse. But there has not been enough study of economic and political feedback loops: how drought in China puts pressure on the Amazon to produce more food and clear more forest. Or how powerful business interests will choose a dictator over a democrat if it means easing environmental controls that threaten their ability to meet quarterly growth targets.

As the chapters in this part of the book show, defenders are in the middle of a widening gulf between politicians and scientists. While the latter urge more ambitious climate and biodiversity protection, the former know they will

receive more campaign funds (and, often, bribes) if they oppose emissions cuts, support extractive industries and weaken pollution regulations. It is not just dictatorships. Britain is pushing ahead with coal mining and Norway with oil exploration.

At some point, people will realize – as many defenders already do – that ecological stress is at the core of the world's current woes. The aha! moment may be when water grows prohibitively expensive, or crops fail owing to successive heatwaves, or the refugee crisis sparks war, or a virus shuts down the global economy, but at some point the weakness of the strongmen will be apparent, and people will seek change.

Defenders are often not well educated, but they have much to teach us. They know this is a battle for survival. They are fighting both for and against “us”. On one hand, most are resisting the extractive businesses that provide wealthy far-away consumers with coffee, palm oil, fish and the titanium, aluminium and copper in our laptops, mobile phones, cars and bicycles. On the other, they are protecting the forests, oceans, climate and other natural life support systems on which we all depend on a far more existential level.

Some defenders have support from international NGOs, lawyers' groups, academics and the United Nations. In UN conferences and academic papers, there is a growing recognition that the cheapest and most effective way to reduce carbon emissions and protect biodiversity is by granting land rights to forest communities. As Amazon resident, Maria do Socorro Costa Silva writes in this part of the book, “The people who live here sustain the forest... Without us, there is no river, there are no animals, there's nothing. If you want to normalize the planet's temperature, you have to take care of us. Because without us there is no future generation”.

No defender sets out to be an activist, let alone a pin-up for the environment. Some – such as the eco-vigilante Bobby Chan – are motivated by idealism or religious faith. Others see the struggle in gender terms. A high proportion, perhaps the majority, are women. But most are compelled to fight by circumstance rather than conviction. Several inherited their struggles or became caught up in disputes when outsiders threatened their homes. As they realize the global pressures behind their local conflicts, they want their stories to be told more widely so others can learn, follow and help. They have lessons for all of us.

Defenders are not always easy to interview as I and the project's photographer, Thom Pierce discovered. Chan rarely dares to leave his organization's headquarters in Palawan because of the dangers of assassination. Bedoya is at such high risk that he has been assigned two armed bodyguards and a bulletproof car by the Colombian authorities. González was unable to visit the communities she represents because of the threats to her life. Babu was reluctant to be photographed near the smelter because police might recognize

and harass her. For journalists, such anxiety is a temporary inconvenience. For the subjects, it is a fact of everyday life. As Mbuthuma said: “I thank God each morning that I am still alive”.

The stories could be both horrifying and inspiring. Even before I knew who she was or what she had suffered, there was clearly something special about Marivic Danyan. The young T’boli woman was standing silently in a noisy crowd when we reached the village of Datal Bonglangon, deep within the conflict-riven island of Mindanao, in the Philippines. The 28-year-old was so diminutive that I thought at first she was a teenager, but there was an intensity in her gaze and a strength in her handshake that suggested she had something extraordinary to relate. It was not until two days later, when she felt fully able to trust us, that she revealed how her husband, father and two brothers had been killed in a single attack by the Philippine army. Talking quietly at night over a chorus of insects and frogs, she described how she narrowly escaped death, and then had to piece together her loved ones’ bodies so she could bury them. She is now looked up to as a leader – a first for a woman in her community – and is determined to continue her father’s campaign to regain ancestral land from a coffee plantation linked to one of the country’s richest families. Her story was a reminder that environmental crime is the ultimate theft from the poor. The destruction of the global commons – clean rivers, unpolluted air, fertile soil – worsens inequality and injustice, and usually goes hand in hand with corruption.

But the stories are rarely black and white. Although defenders are generally portrayed as plucky individuals against giant corporations, the battle lines can be murky. Many villages are violently divided over new mines, dams and plantations that bring jobs as well as environmental and cultural degradation. Defenders suffer and their friends are killed so managers can earn bonuses, politicians can secure bribes, companies can turn a hefty profit and people in richer nations can pay a low price for coffee, palm oil, plastic, fish, aluminium and energy. But that is not the only reason. They also sometimes suffer because neighbours want jobs, roads and better schools. Many individuals cross sides.

In very few of these cases are major corporations directly accused of killings, beatings and intimidation. But they often bear indirect ethical responsibility for creating the social and environmental conditions that led to violence. Culpability is legally and morally diffused by layers of intermediaries, gangs and corrupt politicians. Those who carry out assassinations and beatings are often as poor as the victims. They are usually paid by local businesspeople or city mayors who stand to benefit from agricultural or industrial projects that supply world markets with food and minerals.

Few of the defenders I met were against economic development, but they all want more choice in how it takes place. Some urged consumers to shop carefully, to consider supply chains and boycott firms and products linked with

violence or environmental crimes. Most, though, said they needed broader political change – a greater global push for land rights, stronger civil society guarantees, transparency, tighter regulations on companies and more efforts to punish the officials and gang bosses who are often behind the killings.

Having reported on many of these cases, I believe a wider challenge is to close the gulf between them and us, the local and the global, between the points of production and consumption, between the environmental periphery and the economic centre. On a psychological and philosophical level this means narrowing the gap between the subjective self and the objective other.

This requires a change not just in global governance, trade rules and international law, but in our feelings about nature, our valuation of the commons, and our responsibility to other species and future generations. Chemistry, biology and physics are essential to prove how we rely on declining life support systems, but datasets are not enough. Truth must resonate on an emotional level. A good place to start would be to champion abundance over income, collective well-being over individual consumption, and to change the language we use to describe our place in the world.

I have never been entirely comfortable using the term “environmental defenders”. This was partly because many campaigners are fighting for territory – their land and our Earth. But the problem is mainly with the word “environment”, which always seems to widen rather than close the distance between subject and object. In English, this term is uneasy on the ear and stiffly at odds with the vibrant orgy of life it represents. This reflects the word’s hodgepodge Victorian origins. The first use of “environment” in its modern sense was in 1828 by the Scottish thinker Thomas Carlyle, who borrowed the French “*environ*” (surrounding) to express the German term “*Umgebung*” (which conveys more of a sense of encompassing) in a controversial translation of Goethe. In that era, the word denoted – as now – a flux of landscape, spirit and culture that shaped humanity more naturally than the mechanistic drives of the Industrial Revolution. But it was also wrapped up inside a Western Enlightenment duality of self and “other”. The environment became something to exploit, rather than something that humanity was part of. As Albert Einstein later put it: “The environment is everything that isn’t me”. This was a brilliantly simple way of describing how every individual feels themselves to be the centre of their own universe, but it also suggested that nature is something separate that we can affect without being affected: that we can run down without paying a price.

Carlyle and Einstein would probably be horrified at how far this duality has gone. Tension between the natural environment and the human economy has been building for over two centuries. Starting in Britain, the carbon-capital industrial model has long been extracting minerals and organic resources, and discharging the waste into the air, sea and land. As more nations developed,

they exported their environmental stress to the next country rising up the economic ladder. Now that the world's most populous countries, China and India, are replicating this paradigm, there are very few places left to absorb the impact. Competition for what is left is growing.

Today, the natural environment and the human economy are treated as antonyms. The greater the gap between them, the more peripheral and frightening nature seems. No wonder those who defend it suffer such persecution.

Closing distance is one role of a journalist. After all, the word "media" essentially means go-between. International institutions, NGOs and companies can also play a part. Showing how defenders fight not just for themselves, but for us is a step in the right direction. Supporting them with laws, lobbying and financial backing for civil society would go much further. Their struggle is linked to that of Greta Thunberg, the school climate strikers, Extinction Rebellion, the Sunrise Movement and those who do their fighting in parliaments, conference halls and executive boardrooms. There are many battles, but one war. In a world pushed beyond ecological limits, there are no margins left. The periphery is the centre. In this last stand for nature, defenders are on the front line, fighting for all of us.