13. Living our values: using art and technology to campaign for nature in Turkey

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We never planned to become forest guardians. It just happened. We have known each other since our teens. We grew up in middle-class neighbourhoods of Istanbul. We were artists, city dwellers, cogs in a capitalist culture, living a life that the system wanted us to live. The key moment was when we realized this life is destroying the natural world we love. Although we tried to be sensitive, careful consumers, there came a point when it felt unbearable to be part of this crime.

So, in 2004, we moved into the wild to try to experience living simply and in harmony with nature. We made an earthen house in Alakır Valley from the natural materials that we found around the land. It was near a natural spring and we made a garden for food. Everything was going well for us. While observing and learning we fell in love with the wild and became like a family with all the living beings around. A few years later, a handful of companies came to destroy the valley we live in. They planned to build a hydroelectric power plant on the beautiful and pristine Alakır River. This would have destroyed the unique biodiversity of the valley.

We decided to resist. Until this moment, we had not been using electricity, technology or the internet. We did not need to. But to spread the word about the threat to the area, we started using mobile phones, cameras and social media. All powered by a small solar panel. We used them to raise awareness and show people how destruction in the wild was directly related to consumption. At the same time, we shared our experiences living off-grid. That attracted the attention of many people and some big media organizations. We took the company to court to fight for the river and nature, made peaceful demonstrations and organized meetings and art festivals to raise awareness of the ecological breakdown. We made four music albums to raise the funds needed to pay our court costs. Using art was a bridge for us to tell people about the destruction of the wild, which is normally far from their eyes. We reached out to universities,

scientists and environmental groups. Within two years, various scientific field trips to the valley discovered three new plant species.

When we started our struggle to protect nature in the valley, we defined three key strategies that we saw as the legs of a tripod: law, science and action. While opening up cases in the courts to protect the valley, biodiversity research showed what we were trying to protect and the peaceful demonstrations, meetings and art festivals drew more attention to the issue. On the internet, we connected with others in our region and around the world, all people on the front line of the fight to save nature. Sharing our experiences and realizing that we were not alone helped us a lot psychologically and technically. We used social media effectively from the accounts we opened up specifically for this issue. We called this togetherness ‘Alakır Nehri Kardeşliği’ (Friendship of Alakır River).

After eight years of our campaign, the authorities cancelled two hydroelectric power plant projects and designated the area a strictly protected site. However, our struggle continues as we try to protect the biodiversity of the valley against deforestation and hunting, which are other elements in the climate crisis and ecological breakdown.

This experience showed us how much can be achieved by even just a couple of people living in harmony with nature and an awareness of what is going on around them. By peacefully struggling against dirty projects that are harming nature, and taking support from the cities, millions of lives can be saved.

Turkey is like much of the rest of the world in madly pumping the consumer lifestyle and attacking nature to try to satisfy its endless desires. But now many people have started to live in nature and defend the areas where they live. More recently, this is evident in the İda Mountains in the Northern Aegean part of Anatolia. The people who moved into that area are now strongly campaigning against the planned gold mines there. They are also receiving strong support from sympathetic outsiders. We went there to show solidarity and to share our experiences. Now the defenders there are building a winter camp near a gold mining operation that will poison the spring water and has already started cutting down thousands of trees.

All these experiences show us that first, we humans have to be honest with ourselves. If we do not change anything in our consumption levels and still talk about protecting nature, we become as hypocritical as the system we are trying to change. And secondly to act... We must all do whatever we can do without thinking if it is big or small. Civil disobedience will be the key. Everyone who truly cares about the environment and the future must create or get involved in the nearest non-violent groups. We all have to push the decision-makers and politicians for environmental justice for all the living beings on the Earth. The time is now. And everyone is needed.