

# GOOD NATURED EP 10 HOMERO ARIDJIS



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## INTRO

**Julia:** The Good Natured podcast comes to you from Conservation Optimism and its Founding Partners, Synchronicity Earth and the University of Oxford.

**Sofia:** Welcome to Good Natured, a podcast where you can join us for uplifting chats that shine a light on conservation challenges.

**Julia:** In each episode, we interview an inspiring conservationist. Our fascinating guests come from many backgrounds: artists, scientists, activists, and many more.

**Sofia:** I'm Sofia, a PhD student focusing on marine conservation. I love doing science and telling stories through film, writing, improvised comedy and now podcast.

**Julia:** And I'm Julia, a science communicator, and journalist. I'm passionate about sharing what people are doing to make the world a better place.

**Sofia:** Hello Julia.

**Julia:** Hey Sofia!

**Sofia:** Today on the podcast, we have our first poet and also our first diplomat, and it happens to be the same person! We're going to be speaking to Homero Aridjis, who is a Mexican poet, novelist activist, and diplomat. Essentially his career has just spanned all sorts of fields and he has written almost 50 books.

**Julia:** Another interesting aspect of Homero's work is the fact that he founded the group of 100. This is a group of intellectuals and artists who united to tackle and environmental issues and raise awareness of these specific issues in Mexico and also internationally.

**Sofia:** Homero's served as Mexico's ambassador to the Netherlands and Switzerland, and then also to UNESCO in Paris. And he's won many literary prizes. In fact, one article that I was reading about him said that his greatest legacy is his words. I found that such a fascinating concept.

**Julia:** As someone who does lots of writing myself and has a passion for words, I'm excited to hear a bit more about that aspect of Homero's career and to understand the relationship he has with poetry, who were the inspirations behind him becoming a poet. So I can't wait to hear a bit more about that aspect of what he does.

**Sofia:** He's an incredibly dedicated environmental activist. He's championed a lot of different causes and species within Mexico and I'm looking forward to hearing from him.

**Julia:** Well, Sophia, let's get started then and have Homero on the podcast!

## **THE INTERVIEW**

**Sofia:** Thank you so much for being here with us today, Homero! You grew up in the state of Michoacán near the area where monarch butterflies gather for the winter. You referred to the protection of this site as “the environmental cause of my life”. What sparked your interest in the butterflies and why do you think it's such an important place to protect?

**Homero:** Well because you see as a child I saw the monarch butterflies flying across the streets of my village like aerial rivers every winter. And then when I was at school, we went as an excursion every year to the sanctuaries in the mountain called Cerro Altamirano. Then it was like the excursion of the year for us as children to see the butterflies in the sanctuaries.

One of my worries, always, was that I saw the deforestation. We had politicians, loggers, destroying the forest and I didn't want the hill of my village to have the same fate. Since I was a child and later when I was a grown-up -before I became a committed environmentalist- I wanted to save the hill of my village. And because it was the symbol of this monarch butterflies, I wanted to protect also the monarch butterflies.

Then when we founded the Group of 100 in 1985. The Group of 100 is comprised of prominent artists and intellectuals who first joined together in March 1985 to raise general awareness about the severity of the environmental problems facing Mexico City and to prompt the government into action.

The group also was seeking to reverse the ecological and environmental deterioration through the country by defending various species and habitats to ensure the continuance of Mexico's rich biological diversity.

We wanted to protect the monarch butterflies. In 1986, there was a lot of threats to the sanctuaries and we asked the president of Mexico at the time to declare the habitat of the monarch butterflies as protected sanctuaries and the answer was that it was ok! And there were five sanctuaries protected in October 1986.

The problems didn't finish there because there was a lot of illegal logging and also there were many local *caciques* destroying the forest. I wrote many, many articles in the newspapers and I made many calls to stop the logging.

Then when I was an ambassador to UNESCO, one of my ambitions, private ambition, was to get the UNESCO to declare the sanctuaries in Mexico Natural Heritage of Humanity. And before I was leaving UNESCO, the committee of the natural heritage approved the monarch butterfly sanctuaries as protected Natural Heritage of Humanity.

And I wrote many poems so you know it wasn't only an environmental fight but it was also a continual inspiration to my writing and poetic work. I wrote many poems about the butterflies and also a book called *The Mountain of the Butterflies*. For me, it was like a symbol of the environment because you see it's such a fragile insect. Flying from Canada to Mexico, crossing thousands of miles from country to country to spend the winter in Mexico. They appear on November the second, the Day of the Dead, and local people thought that the butterflies were the souls of the dead people or their own families who were returning to the Earth in the shape of the butterflies.

**Sofia:** Wow, that's amazing! I didn't know that. I grew up in Mexico and I didn't know that there was that association between the monarch butterflies and the Day of the Dead.

**Homero:** I had three sisters who died before I was born. Both were among the group of dead people coming back to Earth in the shape of butterflies. Sometimes I felt that one of my sisters or the three were coming back. I felt the presence of supernatural humanity coming back to the planet in the form of butterflies.

**Julia:** I love the idea to have the butterfly as a symbol of this. It's beautiful! I just wanted to ask you a question relating to the Group of 100 that you've mentioned before. So you've got, as you said, artists and intellectuals together. Why was it important to you to bring both artists and intellectuals?

**Homero:** Because, you know, in Mexico as in other countries in Latin America, but especially Mexico, the intellectuals have to be public figures. There is a tradition, like Diego Rivera, Pablo Neruda came to Mexico, there was Octavio Paz, and there were people before me who were defending political causes.

And also because I was a poet then my group were intellectuals. I had friendships with painters like Francisco Toledo, Rufino Tamayo, Leonora Carrington, and also architects, journalists. That was my medium so then it was natural for me to go to them to ask for support for the environmental cause.

We even made the first exhibition of ecological art in Mexico in 1985. For example, there was a very famous painter called Tamayo whose paintings were worth hundreds of thousands of dollars and he asked me: 'I lend you a painting but what is the insurance? Who is coming? How is transportation to the gallery organised?' And I said to him: 'Rufino [Tamayo] you have to send it yourself because we have no money. No money for insurance, for transportation, nothing. And this is your cooperation for the environmental cause.' And he accepted! There were many painters there, whose work was very valuable, but I said you have to cooperate and to take care of your own work yourself.

**Sofia: What specifically do you think that artists bring to the environmental cause?**

**Homero:** Well, we motivate them in the defence of the planet. And also because sometimes, in a way, in a different perspective, our environment is very important to us because defending the environment is defending humanity. It's one of the key reasons to defend the environment. We are defending life because we're defending water, air, earth, food, and also culture because we can't live without nature. Nature can live without us but we as human beings, we can't live without nature.

**Julia: So I was curious to hear a bit more about the aspect of your work that is poetry. You've been described as an ecopoet before, and I was wondering what drove your interest for that specific artistic format.**

**Homero:** Well, you know, I am fundamentally a poet. I have heroes in poetry in the past like Virgil, Homer (my name), and Greek philosophers like Heraclitus, writing about or talking about the four elements. And the four elements of philosophy are also the four elements of life on the planet: air, earth, water, fire. And then for me, it's not only a

cultural cause but it's also a mythology and also the foundation of the human culture and civilization.

It's based on the earth but also on the planetary and daily bases of agriculture and the mythology of rivers, lakes and seas. For example, you have the Nordic traditions based on the sea. Then everywhere you find the concept of earth and for me, it's not a culture it's a daily life experience.

Nature is not only a concept but is a way of life. I love trees but also butterflies, bees, every living creatures because I grew up in this mysticism of nature. And for me, you have to defend the things you love. I know that poetry is not very popular in the way that you can't make money but I love poetry and the environment for me is the poetry of life. I can't be living now in a world without poetry or be a member of humanity without feeling the poetry of human beings.

**Julia: You've been an ambassador from Mexico to the Netherlands. Could you tell us a bit more about how that experience affected your environmental activism?**

**Homero:** When I went to Holland, what can you do in Holland for the environment? What happened was that at the time I was an ambassador there, I received many letters from Dutch people. That was in 1979, in the seventies. It was the beginning of lots of activism in the Netherlands defending the sea turtles killed in Mexican beaches. And they were writing to the embassy, complaining and sending letters to the Mexican president about the killing of the sea turtles. Then I send it to the president. I had no political manners so because they were letters addressed to the president I sent them to him. And he became very angry. And that was my first act in defence of the sea turtles as part of my position as an ambassador.

And I wrote articles about that topic because nobody wanted to take it. I was talking one day with the Newsweek correspondent here in Mexico City and they didn't want to publish an article with the photos of the bloody killing of sea turtles in Mexico. So I decided that I had to publish it myself under my name. And I investigated about the killings and I wrote five articles in the newspaper, La Jornada, in 1989, called *The Sea Turtle The Way to Extinction*. And it was very well documented, talking about the poachers, and the people in the Ministry of Fishery etc. We began to move to protest in close ties with American groups defending the marine turtles and we had allies everywhere. Then in 1989 and 1990, the Mexican government was forced to declare the total ban of the killing of marine turtles.

And because I am a poet, sometimes, the people in Mexico didn't pay much attention to me. They thought I was a little crazy. They said: 'Oh, he is a poet. He is irresponsible.' And I was happy that they considered me irresponsible and a little crazy because I was very direct in my fight.

**Julia: That sounds challenging. Obviously it's quite a difficult work that you're doing, but what makes you optimistic about the future of nature? What makes you keep going?**

**Homero:** I'm not optimistic, I'm actually very pessimistic! But even if everything gets lost or difficult or there is not going to be a solution because you are fighting against thousands or millions of people who have no environmental conscience and who are predators, then I have the motivation that even if I can't find a solution to the environmental problems, myself as a human being I have to do everything in my hands to try to fix the problems. It's not just for one day. You have to have a commitment and a conviction to defend the environment even if you know that the forces of destruction are very big.

You have governments, you have corporations, you have individuals, you have criminals, you have many people against nature. That is very difficult but you as a human being and a person with an environmental conscience you have to do everything you can, always in peaceful ways and in legal ways, to defend the environment. You have to defend the things you love.

**Sofia: We have one last question for you, which we ask all of our guests on this podcast. If you had to choose one species to advocate for, to make your strongest case about why everyone should care about it and do their best to protect it, what species would that be for you and why?**

**Homero:** It's very difficult because I love turtles, I love monarch butterflies, I love bears, I love bees, I love trees. I love life and the ecosystem of life! It's very difficult to say what you prefer. All are beautiful, even the nasty ones that are dangerous! I am nobody to judge and to choose one species over another. My motivation is love. It's love for nature, love for life and also love for humanity because I believe in humanity as a moral and rational and beautiful part of life.

**Julia:** It's a really tough question. So I think, you know, you're totally in your rights to just not pick one and say that you just love nature as a whole. I think that's a beautiful answer.

**Sofia:** Now we are really lucky because Homero has offered to read us one of his poems. He's going to be reading *A una mariposa monarca* or *To a monarch butterfly*. Can you tell us a bit about this poem and why it's meaningful to you?

**Homero:** That's because it is the symbol of life or nature in the village I was born in. To see the monarch butterflies flying would be for me like a symbol of life. For me, the monarch butterfly is a symbol of resurrection.

**Sofia:** Wonderful! Can we hear the poem?

**Homero:** Yes, first in Spanish and later in English.

*A una mariposa monarca*

*Tu que vas por el día  
como un tigre alado  
quemándote en tu vuelo  
dime qué vida sobrenatural  
está pintada en tus alas  
para que después de esta vida  
pueda verte en mi noche*

*To a monarch butterfly*

*You who go through the day  
like a winged tiger  
burning as you fly  
tell me what supernatural life  
is painted on your wings  
so that after this life  
I may see you in my night*

**Julia:** That was beautiful. Thank you so much!

**Sofia:** Thank you so much. Bye Homero!

**Homero:** Bye, bye! Good luck in the pandemia!

## OUTRO

**Julia:** So, Sofia, it sounds like we've had our first pessimist on the podcast! I'm quite curious to hear your thoughts about that.

**Sofia:** Well, actually I have a little revelation for you, Julia, because he was actually... dun, dun, dunnn ... not the first pessimist we've had on the podcast because I took a test and it turns out I am also a pessimist!

**Julia:** What an absolute shocker! You've been on the Conservation Optimism podcast pretending to be an optimist this whole time, Sofia!

**Sofia:** There's this researcher called Sarah Papworth and she was doing a study on optimism and pessimism, and she had a little scale where you had to answer all of these questions. I think you needed to have a score of something like over 18 in order to be an optimist and I was way lower. So it turned out I was a pessimist! But the thing that she explained to us is that actually pessimists are also important because they bring an element of realism and also help to balance things out and have a different perspective.

**Julia:** I thought Homero's response was interesting though. I can relate to the fact that there are so many challenges in the environmental world that I can see why you'd be feeling quite pessimistic about it. But I liked the fact that he still explained that despite all these challenges, he still has that drive to act and make a change to just make sure that nature is there for the future generations and I think that's powerful.

**Sofia:** I completely agree and ultimately optimism I don't think is about saying everything is perfect either. It's about kind of acknowledging the reality of a situation and still forging on because things are important to you. And in this case, for us and him, nature is important.

And how cool to hear him read that poem, which related so closely to the themes that we talked about in the episode.

**Julia:** I thought it was interesting the way he talked about nature and legends and you know, the fact that you've got all this mythology around nature. And some of the species that he mentioned having a link in the mythology and belief system in Mexico was the monarch butterfly. And I love this idea that because the monarch butterflies come back on the day of the dead during their migration, that they are believed to be the souls of ancestors coming back. And that was something that I thought was beautiful and really poetic in a way, having this link to that specific species and making it so special to people.



**Sofia:** Really meaningful! And it just shows how you can have these linkages. So for example, you know, having this migration then linking into a very special day, it's an amazing thing to think about how all calendars can intersect in that way.

And also he had some incredible visual images about the butterflies as well, and about the fragility of the species and about what that can say about the environment or about us. I loved how he talked about aerial rivers as well when he was talking about them, because this vision of these butterflies sort of streaming through the sky is so lovely.

I've actually gone to see that place when I was little, my parents took me to go and see the monarch butterflies. But I just remember it being so incredible to kind of walk through and it looked like the monarch butterflies were leaves on the trees because there was so many of them and they were all congregating on these trees and it looked like they were orange leaves. It was just so beautiful!

**Julia:** One thing that resonated for me in what you just said as well is this idea of calendar and seasonality. And I think that such an important part of the relationship between nature and humans is that we do have this. So you know, in spring, we know that it's spring when we start seeing flowers coming out or in France, there's a bird species that we spot at some point in the autumn and then in spring and we're just like: 'Oh, they're going on their migration or they're coming back so it's this time of the year'. And I think this rhythm and this connection to nature is also in its own way very poetic.

**Sofia:** When I knew that we were going to do this and I knew that he had worked a lot with monarch butterflies, I looked up the collective noun for a group of butterflies and it turns out it's a kaleidoscope. I think that just in this conversation, we've seen how many different meanings these butterflies can have and they can just be refracted into all of these different images of what they mean, of what they are, and to bring us different types of understanding.

Another thing that I wanted to talk about is the fact that he was in a special position as for example, an ambassador, as a very well-known artist and perhaps he was somebody who did have a direct line to the president, in order to affect change or to access all of these really incredible well-known artists. That's not something that all of us have necessarily. But I think that there is something we can take away from this example and I think that it's just finding the other people who do the things that you're interested in and trying to work with them and push forward change.

**Julia:** Even if you don't have all this, you are still able to make a difference for nature in your own way and I think every little action helps. And you have the power to raise awareness within your family, within your group of friends. So I think it's important to not

be discouraged by the fact that you don't have these things and so your power is so reduced. You never know what might snowball and become a big thing.

**Sofia:** And for example, I think it was interesting that when we asked him, why did you start a group of artists and intellectuals? He was just like: 'Oh because that was my group. Those were the people that I knew, those were the people that I hung out with and it turned out we all cared about nature and the environment so we decided to band together and do something about it'.

**Julia:** I love this idea of finding who your crew is but I also feel sometimes it might not be your direct friends and family. Sometimes you have to actually search a bit further away to find your crew, but with social media nowadays, and the fact that we've got the internet and forums, you can easily put something out and find people who are interested in the same thing as you are, or who complement you in a certain way.

So if you're keen on having some kind of campaigns around the environment and your thing is words then you might want to team up with a photographer or an illustrator to bring in the visual side of things.

Last weekend I took part in the Virtual Youth Changemakers Convention and it was such an inspiring event. Just to be with all these young people who are in their own way, activists or in their own way, making a difference for the environment and are passionate about it and I think sometimes going to specific events, even if they're virtual or just joining Facebook groups, is a great way to find who your crew is!

**Sofia:** So if we have the ambassadors pushing things forward and the artists pushing things forward and the poets pushing things forward and the conservation scientists pushing things forward, then I think we can get to a good place!

**Julia:** Yes! And I think that's it for this episode, we hope you enjoyed it. Thank you for listening. We hope you enjoyed this episode. And if you did, we'd love to hear your thoughts. You can send us voice notes, at [podcast@conservationoptimism.org](mailto:podcast@conservationoptimism.org) and you can also subscribe on Spotify and Apple podcasts. If you can, you can also rate us on Apple podcasts and that helps other people find us!

This episode was funded by an ESRC Impact Acceleration Account grant through the University of Oxford. Original theme music composed and produced by Matthew Kemp.