

Solidaritree in conversation with Wisdom in Nature

An interview transcript between Solidaritree Co-Founder Lois Donegal
& Wisdom in Nature Representative Shumaisa Khan.

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Where to find us:

Wisdom In Nature : <https://www.wisdominnature.org/>

Free to contact via the website

Twitter : [@wisdominnature](https://twitter.com/wisdominnature)

Solidaritree : Find us on Instagram at - [@solidaritree](https://www.instagram.com/solidaritree)

Contact us via email at solidaritree20@gmail.com

In conversation with - Shumaisa Khan (she/her)
Representation

Shumaisa is a representative at Wisdom in Nature (WiN).

She has served on the Permaculture Association's Research Advisory Board, studied food sovereignty and community food initiatives in London for her PhD, and has taught undergraduate students about environment and inequality at the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment and on sustainable food systems at the University of Brighton.

In keeping with her passion for healing the earth and its communities, Shumaisa facilitates workshops on permaculture and herbalism.

Full Transcript:

1. For anyone that does not know about Wisdom in Nature, can you talk a bit about who you are and what you are currently working on?

We are an Islamic ecological and social action group; we have been running since 2004, and throughout the years we have been involved in a variety of things like campaigning and taking people in our community out into green spaces. For example, we did tree planting at a Muslim-run farm called Willowbrook Farm in its early years, that's in Oxfordshire. Organising different kinds of community events, and trainings from permaculture to facilitation and group work dislocation other organisations, such as Saint Ethelburga's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation and Friends of the Earth.

Fundamental to our group is a focus on process, on how we go about trying to make the world we want.

This starts with how we relate to each other

We use a 5-strand model to guide changemaking, which sets out moving away from degenerative ways & toward life-affirming, generative ways in each of these interconnected domains:

- Earth and Communities
- Deep Democracy
- Whole Economics
- Climate Justice
- all underpinned by Engaged Surrender (to Source, or the Divine).

More detail about this model can be found on our website: <https://www.wisdominnature.org/five-strand-activism-model>

2. Why did you feel it is important to have this space, bringing the Muslim community together on environmental issues?

In our understanding of Islam as a group and mine personally, environment isn't separate from any other aspect of life, it's all interconnected. That's why about 10 years ago we changed our name from London Islamic Network for the Environment to Wisdom in Nature. I was involved in general secular organising around environmental justice and environmental issues, both of which are inherent to Islam. But I felt like many Muslims at that time weren't necessarily aware of the depth of ecological consciousness embedded in our faith, it felt there was a big hole in the way Islam was predominantly understood and lived. Nevertheless, there are differences in people's understanding and practices within any spiritual traditions.

I try to connect with Muslims around our traditions and cosmology, which is different from the dominant way of approaching the environment. In my view Islam has an element of animism within it: what I mean by that is the Quran and other sacred sources explicitly have references to all creations being in communities, like us. I am paraphrasing but it states that, the entire earth is a mosque where we all can worship, or the earth itself reveals all and everyone will be held accountable for what we did with our time on earth, so the natural world -which we are a part of- is sacred.

The interconnectedness is embedded in our faith in terms of economics, ecology, and communities. For example, interest -which is effectively the making of money off of money- is a serious violation of 'right' living and 'right' relationship in our faith. I think it's now more understood in the environmental movement at large, that a debt-based world unanchored to things of real value is one of the factors driving ecological and social devastation.

3. Could you talk a little on the important connection between climate change and Islam, and how Muslims in the UK can engage with climate issues?

As for the connection between climate change and Islam, there are verses in the Quran about all things being created in proportion and measure; climate change impacts (in terms of the technicalities) are very literal manifestations of things violating natural laws or divine laws and a balance being breached, it says disaster will appear if people violate these laws that maintain balance and proportion.

On another level, climate change is just a manifestation of intersecting breaches of 'right relationship' - the 'right relationship' with each other and how we make a living, how we live in community and share, a severance of the cultures of reciprocity, and mutual care and support in relationship of the more than human world (plants, animals, fungi, minerals, water), the 'right relationship' between all of these things are delaminated in Islam. So really, to a large extent the way Muslims engage with climate issues comes back to how they engage with their faith, beyond how it's predominantly done, beyond doing five prayers a day and doing charity, which are all important to their faith. It is not specifically about climate change, but climate change has to do with everything. It's about relating that back to what is and has always been in the faith.

Years ago, we done a photo exhibition about climate change in the Muslim world on Brick Lane where there is a Bangladeshi community, Bangladesh being just one of the many Muslim countries that are really impacted by climate change. So there are many ways to engage.

We've distilled much of the Islamic references in a booklet – Islam and Climate Change: A call to heal, which while dated in terms of the emissions figures, is a good summary of both the roots of the crisis and how to heal: <https://www.wisdominnature.org/resources/climate-change-islam>

4. You talk about an interconnected/holistic approach to environmental issues, showing how intertwined the environment is with everything else. Why do you feel this approach to environmental issues is important?

In a nutshell: because interconnectedness is at the root of everything and the problems are interconnected, so the solutions are also interconnected. The more we cooperate and cultivate mutually beneficial connections, the more we get over atomization and disjointedness, [and] the greater the feedback loops of repair. Whereas if we don't acknowledge the interconnectedness and act accordingly, we can't really get out of the cycle we are in.

5. Why do you think groups that focus on Black and brown communities and our connection with the environment are important?

I think we have to do things that are appropriate to our histories, our presence and way, that resonate with us, not just with regards to environment. There is vast diversity within Black and brown communities but also vast shared experience due to centuries of white privilege. As for our relationships with the environment, in many cases our relationships with the environment are laced with ancestral or current traumas that have to do with racial injustice, which is why I feel Black and brown groups that facilitate the healing of our relationship with the land and more-than-human nature are important and necessary. Take for instance, Black mutual aid organising, which goes back to slavery and through the civil rights movement to today. Environment includes housing, water quality, air quality in urban spaces, etc.

6. What do you feel people who have engaged with your work have gained?

They have gained connection with like-minded people from their faith which helps overcome isolation and can encourage more action. They gain a deeper understanding of their faith, gaining more awareness of power dynamics within groups, of organising, as well as gaining skills for permaculture design and application, for example.

7. What more would you hope personally to achieve?

We really try to de-compartmentalise all the many things around economics, deep democracy and the spiritual underpinnings. We try to raise consciousness, among Muslims but also more broadly. In terms of tangible achievements, I dream of seeing more communities organising in this way. Whether or not we can achieve that is beyond my control, so it comes back to trusting the process.

I think it is a difficult achievement when we are drowning in the sense of urgency. To be like, “yeah, we are going to be contemplative and reflect” when you have so much coming at you, when you have issues surrounding the economy, the climate and a pandemic, to say we will focus on slowing down and reflecting can be difficult to do - but we try to stick with it.

8. What change would you like to see in the environmental movement?

In movements in general and groups in general, I'd like to see more focus on process, on the means being as important as the ends we seek, and more skilfulness around embodying fierce love, embracing different perspectives and not being caught up in binaries and self-righteousness, and reflection as a practice, focusing on quality over quantity.

Obviously, there are times you can't organise like this, when in extreme situations, but overall, I'd like to see more of that in the way we live. More awareness of appropriateness, when you need to be in that mood but not in that mood all the time. Even with things that are more urgent it can be important to just stop to think, it can actually speed things up.

In life we don't take the time to take a more spacious meeting because we are all too busy for meetings. It is like this hamster wheel of bad communication and misunderstandings. Whereas if we would've been brave enough to make more time for a more spacious conversation it could save time and emotional stress.

9. What message would you give to young Muslims wanting to be more involved in the environmental movement?

Everyone, including youth, will have something tugging at them, a particular interest or curiosity. I would say to nurture and follow that, that is going to lead to the path which is right for that person. Focus on quality and nurturing relationships with those you resonate with - that could be other youth, or it could be elders. I think intergenerational connection is so important, especially among our Black and brown communities, but also in general - it could be with a tree! Taking time to connect with the more-than-human world, building in time for reflection and contemplation may seem counterintuitive at a time of such urgency, but I think it's really important because it helps to take not just action but makes more sensible use of our time and energy, it generates creativity and helps to heal despair.