

River Stories edit 8

Episode Title

Colombia River Stories: The symbiotic relationship between the Río Atrato and the community who call it home

Subtitle

Anne Kerr discovers the stories of the Rio Atrato in Colombia and meets the artist, academics, lawyer and river guardian fighting to uphold its status as a bearer of rights.

Description

The 400 mile long Río Atrato is in the Chocó department of northwest Colombia. Chocó is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the country. It's also one of the poorest, and the river provides essential transport and economic opportunities to the residents.

In today's episode, Anne Kerr meets her colleagues Mo Hume and Allan Gilles, and artist Jan Nimmo to hear about the project *Colombia River Stories*.

This interdisciplinary research project, which is a collaboration between the universities of Glasgow, Portsmouth and Nottingham, combines art, song, citizen science and activism to respond to the court ruling T-622, which recognises the River Atrato as a bearer of rights.

The ruling demands actions to address the socio-environmental devastation of conflict-linked, illegal mechanised gold mining in the collective territories of Chocó's Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. The project supports the local communities as they push for the full implementation of T-622 in the face of an ongoing humanitarian crisis in the region.

Anne Kerr script

Hello, today we're talking about the River Atrato in Colombia and the community who have fought to keep it alive to secure their survival.

Bernardino Mosquera Palacios

What does the Atrato mean for us? Basically the Atrato has been the lung of these communities and it is everything because it is through the Atrato that we have lived. Through the Atrato we have reached civilization, through the Atrato we have been able to share and our ideals, preserve our culture, our collective way of life. The Atrato has provided us an ancestral cultural commercial exchange. we describe the Atrato in a single phrase: it has been everything for us

Anne Kerr script

That's Bernardino Mosquera Palacios, he's a River Guardian of the Rio Quito, a tributary of the Atrato. He was appointed by his community to work with the government of the Chocó region in Colombia to uphold the rights that the Atrato was awarded in 2016 / 2017.

Bernadino is part of a pioneering group of community leaders, activists, lawyers and academics who are fighting for the Atrato's future and forging a path for other communities to work in partnership with the natural environment.

THEME MUSIC

I'm Anne Kerr, welcome to Recovering Community, the podcast about communities; how they are built, broken and remade.

The 400 mile long Rio Atrato is in the Chocó department of northwest Colombia. Chocó is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the country, it's also one of the poorest, and the river provides essential transport and economic opportunities to the residents.

But we begin our story over 5000 miles away, on the banks of another river, the River Clyde. I went down to the Finnieston Crane, to meet my colleagues, Mo Hume and Allan Gilles to hear about their work. At the height of Glasgow's industrial might, steam engines were loaded onto ships bound for far off destinations. The Crane is an icon of Glasgow's past and a reminder of just how much the city has changed.

The Clyde itself is *still* part of the fabric of Glasgow, it's essential to how we see and interact with the place. And like many port cities, the meeting of river and sea draws our eyes - and our imaginations outwards.

The city has a long history of solidarity with workers and oppressed people both at home and much further afield.

Here's Mo...

Mo Hume

So the central project that we're working on is a multidisciplinary project called Colombia River stories. And it's about trying to understand the level of environmental and socio environmental damage that has been caused on the Atrato basin. And this is due to a number of factors, but mainly armed conflict, which has been sustained and protracted over many decades in Colombia, and also the increase of illegal mechanised gold mining, because the Atrato region is very rich in natural resources. And the presence of illegal mining coincides with the presence of illegal armed actors. And this has caused huge devastation both in physical environmental terms - so in terms of the river basin and the integrity of the river - but also in terms of people's

lives, huge displacement, confinement, and violent incidences. So our research, as I say, is multidisciplinary. And it tries to bring together these different threads, both mapping, the devastation that illegal mining and conflict have caused in the river, but also trying to rescue that history of resistance that has led these communities to be able to kind of resist over many years, but also has led to this very pioneering court ruling where the Colombian Constitutional Court recognised the Atrato River as a bearer of rights, which was a landmark ruling in Latin America.

Anne Kerr

And solidarity is a big feature of your work. Could you tell us more about that, and the artwork that's involved with your colleague, Jan?

Mo Hume

The reason why this project originated was due to solidarity links between the University of Glasgow, the Scottish Catholic International Aid Foundation, and communities along the Atrato River. And Ximena Gonzalez, who's the lawyer who ended up writing most of the case that led to the Atrato being recognised as bearer of rights. She came to Glasgow in 2015, with the idea of just contacting various academics, to engage in some kind of form of academic solidarity, if you'd like, with communities along the Atrato River. So that's where the Colombia River stories was born. And we managed to get funding from that. But as the research progresses, as these things do, it grows, arms and legs, if you like. And one of the things that we thought was really important was finding different ways of expressing our solidarity. So we have had long standing relationship with a Glasgow based artist, Jan Nimmo, whose work has really engaged over many years in solidarity with different communities in Latin America. So working with Jan, we have conceptualised a project called Rivers in Solidarity, which is about people coming together to produce messages from their rivers, the rivers that have defined their identity, in solidarity with the river Atrato in Colombia.

Jan Nimmo

For me, putting a human face to social and environmental issues is really important. And I think it helps communities that are further away to identify and relate to issues on the other side of the world.

Anne Kerr script

This is Jan Nimmo, she's an artist and part of the River Stories team. Jan has collaborated with many communities in Latin America, and much of her work centres around environmental and human rights issues.

Jan Nimmo

The Ríos Solidarios, the Rivers in Solidarity project. Well, it's really kind of devised with Mo and Allan. So what I've done is I've created a few pieces of work to do with rivers here, especially the Clyde, it's the river that connects me to my home territory, which is Kintyre, down the Firth of Clyde and, and the piece that I've made for the particularly for this is one of a raven at the Finnieston Crane because, well, it's always nice to have a bit of nature in the middle of the city.

But there's actually two ravens roosting in the crane. So hence this thing of bringing together industry and nature, and again, it's echoes of gold mining, and a kind of more environmental aspect to the Río Atrato, to its environment.

So I've got the one which there's a piece of work here called I am the River Clyde, and I stand in solidarity with the Río Atrato, Chocó, Colombia, and it's basically a picture, it's like a raven, which is central and as I explained, this is the one of the ravens that roosts up there. There's a pair, they mate for life. So they're back and forwards and I see them when I'm out running. And the plants around it because I realised that probably within indigenous communities, especially in Colombia, that plants will have a, not only a kind of medicinal or significance, but there's also a spiritual aspect to some plants. So I've got Rowan, Mountain Ash around here and Hawthorn which are kind of both trees that have got a special spiritual significance in Scotland. And there's also olive branches here because the raven went away, biblically speaking, and never came back and it was the dove, but I think it was because the ravens were out there having fun that they didn't bother to come back with the olive branches. But it's also the thing about you know, a lot of the central vein of this project is about peace and finding resolution to conflict. So hence the olive branches here that you can just barely see them.

And I don't know if you want me to talk about the others. This one's quite a personal one. So you know, I live in Glasgow but I'm from Campbeltown. And I wanted to make a really personal appeal to the people of the Chocó region with something from my home patch, which is South Kintyre. So this piece is called I am the Machrihanish Water and I stand in solidarity with the Río Atrato, Chocó, Colombia. And it's a piece about my father and my father started out as a coal miner in Machrihanish, one of the most remote coal mines in Scotland. So they've got pictures here, starting off with my father as a young boy at the Goldrens which is the beach at Machrihanish. And one of the things that he did was forage for Lapwing eggs and Lapwings locally are known as peeweeps, so he was known as Peeweep, because in those days, you could probably legally I think, so there's a Lapwing which is central to it, and also in the background of that there's an image of Argyle colliery in Machrihanish. There's also, when my father finished work early one day the Machrihanish water flows past the site of the mine which is now caravan site, he went fishing and caught this massive salmon, got into the local paper. And there's another little image here, which is a stone carving of a miner, which is in the Burnet Building, which is the museum in Campbeltown. And there's a drawing here of my father as an older man. So it's a kind of complete history of my father.

And as I say, it may seem unrelated to what's happening in Colombia. But for me, there's something very kind of powerful about the way that my father worked from a very early age, worked physically very hard, right up until he retired and beyond. So that really informs how I feel about the people that I work with in Latin America. And I think that we've got lots of things in common. And I think it's very easy. And I find this all my working life as an artist that people will really, if you just sit down and explain what ordinary people's experiences are, that they will resonate with people, and it will create solidarity, so that these messages of solidarity they're messages of love and, and, and understanding, I think,

Anne Kerr

So listening to Jan talk, I'm really struck by how we often default to think of community as about belonging, and who's allowed or entitled to belong. But actually, what Jan's talking about is much more than belonging, and in that simple sense, it's about connections, and connections that go across time. And across space. And connections that are even forged in in a world of of lockdowns, digitally. So has it changed how you think about community to work on this project?

Allan Gillies

One of the things that really come out of the research is, the connection between community and place, community and nature.

Anne Kerr script

This is Allan Gillies, he researches elicited economies in the global south and he's conducted field work in Chocó for the River Stories project.

Allan Gillies

So everything about the kind of way of life of that community, the rhythms, the rhythm of life in the community is kind of tied to their territory and the river, which is why the impacts of the mining have been so severe. So the mining, is remoulding that geography, kind of stripping away the forests and creating these vast deserts where nothing grows. And from that the communities are under extreme stress and their identity, their very survival's at risk. So yeah, I suppose my understanding of communities changed thinking about this connection with place with nature.

Anne Kerr script

I want to go back to Bernardino, the river guardian from Paimadó in the Chocó Region to hear more about the threats his community faces

Bernardino Mosquera Palacios

For us I think the biggest challenges facing the community... in the territory the biggest challenge comes from extractivism. Outsiders who, knowing the potential that the community has, our cultural heritage, our biodiversity that mining practically destroys. These are the biggest challenges that we are going to face because 90% of the people who come to the territory come in search of the wealth that exists in the territory[MH4]

The Third question, what do collective rights mean? I think it was a struggle to get collective rights for us, it was a struggle for our leaders to create Law 70[MH3]. After the passing of Law 70, through which they gave us that recognition of our [collective] territory, which until then was considered a wasteland by the Colombian state. Now that today we can have a collective title for all the communities settled in the territory is of great value to us since, as the law says, the territory is 'non-transferable, imprescriptible, and non-mortgageable' so the idea of collective rights has a hugely powerful meaning for us.

Mo Hume

People in Chocó talk about territory rather than land and they see territory which is the kind of the collection of all living things, including humans, including animals, including plants, and central to that, the river, and they understand this territory to be a space for life. So it's not something we own. It's something that we hold, and we have a responsibility to steward to look after to protect. And we can coexist in harmony with this.

So, a lot of this kind of socio ecological or political ecological thinking is becoming quite trendy in academic terms at the minute, but this is their way of life. And they see a lot of these new laws such as the recognition of the river Atrato, as a recognition of their way of life, rather than something that's been made up by lawyers and some, you know, whereas we we herald it as something quite pioneering and landmark. And I use those terms quite frequently. So I think for me, one of the things that has made me conscious of is that notion of collectivity, because I tend to think of communities, individuals who come together under a shared identity, whereas their shared identity creates a collective rather than atomised individuals. So even land is held in collective ownership, not under individual title. And this is something that these communities fought for for many years, using non violent methods for many years, despite the wider context of violence in which they live.

And I guess, on a personal level, I come from a town where there's a river that divides it, which is Derry in the north of Ireland. So the river has been really central to the conflict there. But growing up beside it, I didn't really think about it, it was just there. And it really does quite demographically, if you like in terms of dividing communities, form that kind of cut between one community and the other. And working on this project has really got me to think really kind of radically about the role of the river in terms of our own, or my own conflict if you like. So I guess for me, it really has made me think about the centrality of nature to conflict, something which I'd never having grown up in a conflict situation never actually thought about at all.

Anne Kerr

So I guess, there's an issue about the way in which we think about communities, just people. And it's actually more than that, it's about the environment. It's about rivers and other aspects of nature. And how we think of community is always shifting, would it be fair to say? Because it makes us think about our past, as Jan spoke about, but also about the future and how, how the environment will change, how the law will change, how people's places that they live and work and how that will change too. So it's always on the move, community much like rivers.

Mo Hume

So the community in Chocó have had a long history of struggle. And a kind of key element of that struggle was the struggle for recognition. So as mainly, Afro descendants, so therefore slave descendant communities and indigenous communities, having the legal recognition of them as Colombian citizens was huge and important, but also the recognition of their ways of life, to protect themselves against mega projects, so kind of illegal logging or massive logging. Agro industry, gold mining on a massive scale, whether that be legal or illegal, which kind of

causes such devastation. So since then, communities have been struggling to kind of maintain their hold on their land. So from say, the mid 2000s, but intensifying after say 2008 and the crash, we see an intensification of illegal mechanised gold mining along the river, and communities kind of got together - this divided communities because often it brings very quick riches. But these are not sustainable, and they don't tend to stay in communities. So these communities came together and used this constitution of 1991. So used the Constitutional Court to bring a series of actions against the Colombian state to call for recognition of the legal rights of the river. And this resulted in a series of smaller actions, but more specifically, the court ruling T622, which is the sentence or sentencia, on the River Atrato was passed in 2017. And that was quite landmark in recognising the intricate nature of people and the river system. And they're so inextricably kind of connected, that you cannot separate the river from the people. And on that rests that the court ruling T622 which is the ruling that recognises the Atrato as as a bearer of rights.

Allan Gillies 14:55

So yeah, these communities are I suppose at a crossroads in a way where, these kind of external forces are putting pressure on their traditional ways of life. And the sentence is one way that communities are trying to protect some of that to protect their connection with their territory, with the river. But I suppose the... it's been really frustrating for the communities that the implementation of the sentence has been quite slow. And our research was trying to support communities as pressure for that implementation of the sentence.

Ximena Gonzales first came Glasgow 2015, to kind of tell us about the Atrato and the work that they were doing. At that point, she worked for an NGO called Tierra Digna, which she was one of the founder members, which was an environmental NGO in Colombia. So she was one of the lawyers who kind of worked with communities to develop the case around the Atrato, and took the case to the Constitutional Court.

Anne Kerr script

I'd like to introduce a key figure in the struggle to secure legal recognition and protection for the people of Chocó. This is Maria Ximena Gonzalez Serrano, she's closely connected with the River Stories project and was one of the first lawyers who worked with communities to develop the case around the Atrato and took the case which led to the ruling T622 to the constitutional court.

I asked her to tell us more about her work

Maria Ximena Gonzalez Serrano

The Ruling T-622 is an important ruling because it recognises the connection that the Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities have with the river. For them, the river is a system of life, a productive system and a platform for cultural exchange. And this ruling, for the first

time, stops viewing the river [simply] as a natural resource to satisfy human needs. [Instead,] it tries to adopt the vision of the communities. In this sense, it's a historic ruling. It's important. Obviously, the challenge will be to see how to implement the ruling with a state that is highly bureaucratic, corrupt and with many structural problems.

The Afro-Colombian communities in the Pacific region, particularly in Chocó, have learned historically from processes – many years ago – in defence of their identity, in defence of their rights and in defence of their territory. The Atrato and the ruling that protects it, is part of this chain and this movement that they have carried for more than three centuries in Colombia. So for me, that makes the ruling part of the history of struggle for the recognition of their rights and this has much to teach Colombia and the rest of the world.

I am convinced that it is a source of power and strength to communities that have historically been excluded. It is a question of justice. It is necessary for the social, political and economic transformation that Colombia, Chocó and the world needs. I think the challenge that we have with this ruling is not that it just gives voice [to the communities] but that it makes the community's vision the priority and makes the river for its people.

Anne Kerr script

So with the collaborative aspects of Ximena's testimony in mind, I asked Mo how the River Stories project has confronted some of the uncomfortable discussions that have emerged from the recognition of Glasgow - and the wider UK's - colonial past. How have the team ensured that the community work they've undertaken has been equitable and in partnership?

Mo Hume

So the whole conceptualisation of this project came from an invitation, from communities in Chocó to form a network of academics and solidarity with communities in the Atrato. So we've tried to work, and I don't think this is a perfect, I don't think we always manage it, I think we strive and we aim to have more equitable partnerships. But the reality is, we have more resources, we have more technology, etc. So the key aim, behind the Columbia River stories was to work with communities, to create these stories to co create these stories, so that they would be of some use to communities and their advocacy, because the key thing that we found initially was that there was very little data on the actual river itself and how it had changed. And it's all very well saying, Oh, we recognise a river has rights, but to how does a river claim its rights? Especially when the scientific data are very dispersed and of dubious quality, which we see as something highly political, that you know, this river is not being monitored. One of the things that that community representative said to us is we have the knowledge, we have empirical knowledge of the river, what we don't have is the technical language. And obviously, for legal processes, and for advocacy, you need some kind of technical language and technical proof, if you like. So, one of the elements of this project was a citizen science element. That was a very low budget citizen science element. But it meant that two river communities had the

equipment, but also had training so that they could do weekly monitoring of their just basic river health monitoring. So they built a whole database, over a year of weekly results of this monitoring. So they were also part of this research. But they were very clear from the outset that they knew exactly what was happening in the river. They didn't need us to tell them they lived it. So you know, it was very clear that we weren't going to tell what was happening in their river. But we could provide other sources of confirming, or triangulation, if you like, of the facts on the river.

Anne Kerr

As you know, the theme of this podcast series is around recovery, recovering communities, could you reflect for me on how the community's recovered and will continue to recover in the future?

Mo Hume

I think one of the things that's become really apparent to us is that recovery is a process. It's it's a kind of, it's not an a perfect endpoint. It's a process and I think these communities are, are constantly, I don't know if the word recovery, but they're constantly in struggle for survival. And these communities have engaged in such incredibly creative and thoughtful strategies to always have to think two steps ahead, to always have to kind of think about well, well how can we get around that particular obstacle, you know, it's hugely inspiring to see how they're so committed to their survival, they're so committed to their kind of future generations. And that legacy, the way that they have gained a legacy from their ancestors, their responsibility to their children, their grandchildren and future generations as well.

Anne Kerr script

Here's Allan Gillies again

Allan Gillies

I remember, at times, when I was doing fieldwork in Chocó, just feeling completely hopeless at the scale of the challenge, the challenge that the communities were facing, the injustice of it, and thinking things will never change with the kind of strength of the forces that the communities were facing. But it was always it was always kind of my friends in the diocese that said, you need to maintain hope. And things are achieved through kind of small steps. And it relates to this idea of struggle that the communities refuse to give up, things can change. So I suppose that that kind of gives us as kind of outside actors as kind of partners in the research hope that the research can contribute to that struggle.

Anne Kerr script

And here's artist Jan Nimmo again

Jan Nimmo

I guess my role in the project is just almost as a catalyst to getting other people to make work. So I've made a few pieces that are kind of personal to me and about my surroundings. But I'm

hoping that this will be much bigger and really about other people's reactions, partly to make themselves, think about what's around them, but also think, globally, in terms of solidarity. I think we underestimate sometimes what solidarity is because I think a lot of people here maybe think solidarity is about money and giving money to charities or NGOs. But actually sometimes I think just gestures can have just as much of an impact on people. So I think that if we can help in any way and the work can help do that and help people talk about Columbia, what's happening there and specifically about Chocó and the Rio Atrato, then that's a good thing.

Anne Kerr - script

And that's a thought echoed by the river guardian Bernardino

Bernardino Mosquera Palacios

In terms of the rivers in solidarity and the river stories project, I think it is excellent because we have always been looking for and we have tried to make visible everything that is happening around the Atrato, around our communities, so that [our story] reverberates [around the world] and does not stay here in the territory. If we do not make [our story] visible (~~heard?~~) people remain oblivious. We know that the national and local state authorities are not very given to disseminating this type of action, so we believe that the rivers project is excellent.. to continue making visible what is happening around the Atrato and its communities.

Anne Kerr - script

I'd like to leave our final thought to the lawyer and campaigner Maria Ximena Gonzalez Serrano

Ximena Gonzalez

I would like to say to the people listening in the UK that we need all your support. We need connections between rivers, but also connections between people that want to transform the bureaucratic and anthropocentric vision that we have of our environment and about the future. We need to change this vision. And in this, we are all from the one community. I believe firmly that solidarity is the path to change.

Anne Kerr - script

Thank you for listening to Recovering Community, if you'd like to find out more, the project is being documented on a blog, search for Chocó River Stories or follow the link in our show notes

I'm Anne Kerr and I'm grateful to my colleagues Mo Hume and Allan Gillies, artist Jan Nimmo, River Guardian Bernardino Mosquera Palacios and lawyer Maria Ximena Gonzalez Serrano for joining me today.

Cintia Machí Alonso and Fernando Banciella read the translations of our interviews with Bernardino and Ximena

The songs you heard in this episode are connected to the River Stories project. And Fergus McNeill's *Watersong* is written from the perspective of another of Glasgow's much loved rivers, the Kelvin.

Thanks to staff in the School of Social and Political Sciences and the College of Social Sciences who helped with this podcast.

Recovering Community is produced by Freya Hellier.