

# Title and Info

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## Lia Beltrami - Guardians of the Rainforest

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Intro(00:00)

What does access mean to you?

Welcome to the A &E Accessibility and Environment podcast. We're talking to the filmmakers from the first A &E Festival, discussing their work, finding out about them, and exploring how access shapes our abilities and our relationship with the environment.

Today we're talking to Leah Beltrami about her film, Guardians of the Rainforest, which celebrates indigenous women's voices and stories from rainforests in the Amazon, Congo, Basin and Borneo. She talks about the adventures of making the film, the people she met, the spiritual connections that nature brings and how this can unite us all in these difficult times.

AnE Film Festival (00:49)

Hello, Leah.

Lia Beltrami (00:50)

Hello, how are you?

AnE Film Festival (00:53)

I'm good, thank you, thanks for coming today. We normally start by asking people to do a quick description of themselves. so yeah, okay.

Lia Beltrami (01:02)

I'm Leah Beltrami, filmmaker since, oh my God, I should say, 34 years now. So it's a long story. In these 34 years, I've made almost 50 between documentaries and reportage. And I work with my daughter, Mariana, that she's 27. She works at Oxford University part-time.

when she has time, she follows me in making the films, especially when there is an environmental and social issue in the documentary. And in my life I've done a lot of projects and

I'm focused on films that generate a change. So our project is called Emotions to Generate Change. We try to touch the heart of people and so that not a film or a photo exhibition.

they don't stay for themselves but they really create a social change and that's what in which field I'm most interested in.

AnE Film Festival (02:08)

Great, thank you. Certainly this is a good example of it. So the film that we were talking about specifically here that we showed at the festival, which won a prize in fact, was Guardians of the Rainforest. Could you maybe start by telling us a bit about describing the film for someone that hasn't seen it,

Lia Beltrami (02:28)

So the story of Guardians of the Rainforest starts actually a few years ago.

When I was approached by Professor Azza Karam, she was at the time Secretary General of Religions for Peace. And she told me, Leah, we have many projects like Interfaith Rainforest Initiative and a lot of projects with indigenous people for climate issues, to stop climate change, for protecting environment.

But we cannot hear the voice of women, especially indigenous women. And because she told me, Julia, go around giving voice to the women all over the world. Can you think about it? And I spoke with Mariana, my daughter, and it was exactly her field. And we said, yes, it would be very important.

So we started going to New York to speak with Religions for Peace and started conversation with the Rainforest Initiative and we decided to film in the three main big rainforests. So Amazon, Congo Basin and Borneo Kalimantan, Indonesian Borneo Rainforest. So the film follows, mean, indigenous women in these three rainforests.

presenting their point of view, their relationship with the nature, their spiritual approach to the forest. Try to give voice to these women and to amplify their voice.

AnE Film Festival (04:05)

Excellent, yeah. And, well, do want to tell us a bit more about what kind of happens, what unfolds during the film?

Lia Beltrami (04:12)

Yeah, and the main thing is that we always build a mixed troop with the local people. so it's so interesting and it takes out the best out of it. Of course, it's a little bit more complicated because every decision is taken with the community.

But that's the important part of us. Like, for example, we started with the Amazonia rainforest and we decided to go in this place called San Gabriel de Casuera, which is in the corner with

Brazil and Venezuela and in the middle. And it's a place where almost all the population are indigenous. There are more than 20 tribes represented in San Gabriel.

And our local co-producer, Rodrigo Baima, went and discussed for a long time to which tribes we were going to interview and how they want to tell their own story. That's very important. And in Amazonia, was, I mean, it was even difficult at the beginning because to go there, you have to arrive to Manaus and then you can, or...

take a boat for two or three days or there are two flights a week or maybe one. And we were on this small flight to go the first day and it didn't land, it brought us back. And the next day it tried and it was all cloudy and said there are no rollers so if the sky opens, it happens to open, we may land, otherwise no. And we were a little bit scared and at the end he said in such a very unexpected...

way, the sky opened and we can try to land. That try to land was not what we wanted to be. It was a bit weird. No, not at all. And then we arrived and there was a small chariot to bring our suitcases out of the airport and we found Juliana. We were hosted by an indigenous woman and there it was such a deep experience.

AnE Film Festival (06:05)

No, it's not what you want to hear, is it?

Lia Beltrami (06:27)

deep deep deep because we really shared it every day life. So first of all we went with Maria Ausiliadora of the Daw tribe. We had to take so-called, I wouldn't call a boat, but it's a kind of tree, a [carved] tree, which becomes to be kind of canoe, canoe, canoe, don't know, and we crossed the Rio Negro which is a very dangerous river because of the waters and of the fishes and everything.

And it was scary, but we arrived in the other side. We reached the village and it was suffering situation because a few days before, two or three, we don't know exactly if at the end two or three boys, young boys were kidnapped for organ trafficking. So the situation we found was very tough, very sad.

And we tried to listen, to enter in the climate and to listen to the stories and to understand how the women wanted to speak about their relationship with the forest. And so it was...

so deep. But then Maria Ausiliadora, after some days and some filming, she said, but then you have to come to our garden, otherwise you don't understand us so much. And we thought it was a garden near and we said, okay, but it was a smaller boat, really nothing on the boat with all the equipment.

and along these not rivers but waters inside the trees, water, water, it was so, so scary and we arrived in a place and it started raining and we said okay we can go back home but it was not

like that we couldn't go back home we had to go on and when it's raining it starts to be more dangerous because it seems that the snakes are coming out and so...

That was not a nice point. We were walking inside the forest and the women were cutting the forest with their big knives. at one moment they stopped us. Stop, stop, And started shouting and we all stopped. I thought there was the anaconda maybe, snake or... But it was something. It was a wasp, a killing wasp, a wasp that kills the...

even the tarantula spiders. This wasp eats the tarantula. And it's the highest pain for human beings that they can feel in the scale. So I was terrified and I said, let's go back. But they said, no, no, don't worry. We cut another path all the way around the nest. OK, so that was the day in the garden. my God, it was crazy, but it was so interesting. We could see the women really in the field, really there.

AnE Film Festival (09:19)  
Yes.

Lia Beltrami (09:20)  
So that was Amazonia just to give a brief overview.

AnE Film Festival (09:25)  
And was

this your first time going to a place like this

Lia Beltrami (09:28)  
Yes, to Amazonia, yes. I was used to going in deserts or in war zones or in, yeah, mostly in war zones or camps, refugee camps. But in the forest, it was my first experience.

And then we met another tribe, the tribe of Florinda, which they communicate through dance. It was much more relaxing and immersive experience. We danced and we had to eat ants, the insects. And I didn't drink what the other of the crew drank. I stayed out of it.

AnE Film Festival (10:03)  
What was that then?

Lia Beltrami (10:04)  
I don't know, I wouldn't say. They started laughing and the filming until that point were very good but after that they were all moving. They were not stable for the rest of the day and they kept laughing until early in the next morning I think. It was funny, funny indeed. But anyway, from that we danced, we were together, it was so, so good.

It was different from Congo-Basin because I've been many times to Africa. I know many places of Africa. But one year before the filming, Italian ambassador Attanasio great...

special man, very special man. He was on duty and he was murdered in the forest of Congo, Republic Democratic of Congo and DCR and they didn't allow us to go in that area as Italians.

So we worked another way because we were working with the local population we decided to form a crew so to do we shared and online we had lessons online we worked a lot we sent a 4k camera through a very strange way but the camera arrived

And this group of boys, local, they started and they went into the forest. And that was much better because they could go to the pygmies people. The pygmies, are completely... They don't speak with people. They stay within themselves. Yeah.

AnE Film Festival (11:54)  
Isolated, yeah.

Lia Beltrami (11:58)  
So the good part is that the Pygmy opened up with these boys and they accepted to speak. And so that was a different experience.

AnE Film Festival (12:11)  
Yeah, it was very good, very good footage that came through that. Was that, is that something that you think you'd do again having,

Lia Beltrami (12:17)  
I want to do again because after the filming this group, they started to work. They made a profession for them like journalists, local journalists. So you have more effect like this and you have an eye that is, I loved it. So yes, definitely. And then there was the third part, Kalimantan, born Indonesian Borneo.

And that was also an amazing journey, amazing, because I always had a dream of going to Borneo with the Dayak tribes. Because when I was very young, there was a film series on Italian TV, worldwide famous, called the Sandokan. And Sandokan was, he was a prince of Malaysia, but the tribe was the Dayaks.

head hunters. So I was grown up with these Dayaks in mind. And I really, we found ourselves in a place where for weeks we didn't see any tourists, anyone that was not from there. So, and it was the festivity of the harvest. So the Dayak tribes came together, not for tourists or folklore, for themselves to celebrate the harvest.

So we were so privileged to be able to film all this. It was unbelievable. Unbelievable. I hope I can edit something else with this because we have all the footages that we didn't use because they were not women in forest, such important footage that really we want to use it.

We found a completely different climate. Of course, the forest there is in such big troubles because of the palm oil palms.

And it's not like Brazil that there are restricted areas, protected areas, but there in Borneo, they can sell the land. If they have no food, they sell the land. And so, I mean, it's tragic situation. But the people, are so quiet and so in harmony, women and men, that we could really work really in the best place. so it was a...

even a different experience.

AnE Film Festival (14:48)

You've said obviously you've been making films like this for a long time. You've made a lot of films, was there anything that made you want to come and talk to indigenous people about their experiences like this? What led you to this?

Lia Beltrami (15:02)

Yeah, it's because I have a, I feel a strong feeling with local indigenous tribes because they have such a wisdom and they have such a special relationship with creation. I come from the mountains, I'm a mountain woman and even our people, true people from the mountains are

people so connected with nature and even in the mountains we do have a very special wisdom and you can get only if you are in special position to get in touch with mountain people. I live in the Dolomites, north of Italy. And I find that with the indigenous tribe almost the same attitude, so very deep people.

the big wisdom and the wisdom that if you respect and listen and you don't try to force they are eager to share with you. So I felt such a privilege to be able to spread their message around the world.

AnE Film Festival (16:10)

I mean, it's interesting because one of the things that we were often talking about is how a connection with nature and understanding of the environment is just good for people's health and their mental health. OK, let me ask a question. How do you this kind of deep connection with nature is useful to people that are living in?

maybe a big city in an industrialized country.

Lia Beltrami (16:33)

of all, when you are in creation, in nature, you need to leave back behind all your mental structure. You need to be there and to let nature overcome and fill you and overwhelm you. And so the first time can be scary maybe, as it happened to me at the beginning in the forest, then it wash your mind from all the pollution.

mind pollution. And then you are ready to receive and then you receive and what you receive is immense. So for the people that are not used to live in creation and nature, I think it's the best way for mental health and physical health, of course. But for mental health, it's a

So important, so important. like I do just a little window about future projects. So I'm finishing in these days a new documentary called Green Lava. And the Green Lava is the story about a boy who cannot move anything. He has last final stage of muscular dystrophy.

His brother died two years ago and he knows what his future is. So he feels like a volcano lava. But he is so immersed in the mountains and in nature and his life is so connected with nature. He has birds, he has bees and the assistant is taking care of these and he just watches and feels immersed in nature that his life is a green life.

So how much is important for him, nature? Everything. Nature is everything.

AnE Film Festival (18:32)

Absolutely.

I mean, there's that question of sort of spirituality that comes through. So there's a lot

assume that you're you're coming from a Christian perspective is that right? And does how does that tie in with the the wisdom of the forest?

Lia Beltrami (18:44)

I'm

I'm Christian Catholic of my personal faith, but the world is my community. So everyone who's connected with spirituality, I feel like brother and sister because we have to share the most important side of our being. And when you go with indigenous people, this comes even more and more and more because they are so connected with the spirit, with the soul.

and they see the spirit in the trees and it's all connected. So when we have like Pope Francis he's very very much in the environmental

issues. He wrote an encyclical called Laudato Si and he has done the first synod for Amazonia and in the synod for Amazonia it was so important for everyone of every religion there because they have a political document to protect the forest and the subtitle is We are all connected. 'todo esta conectado' We are all connected with all the human beings but we are all connected with the nature.

So with the indigenous religions, spirituality experience, you feel this deep, deep, deep connection with nature and with every human being and every leaf, every flower, every animal.



So it's a deep sharing for me, like that I try to search for spirituality everywhere. So it was really a spiritual experience. And especially also in Borneo to see how deep it's this connection. I knew about Amazonia, but in Borneo I found such a deep connection. Like we met this sister, she was a Catholic sister, and the father was there, he's the animistic.

the leader chief of the village. So like to see the people that go to her father and ask, should I cut this tree? And he asked to the birds and he see how the birds are flying and say, no, no, this please do not cut or yes, you can cut this tree. Or can we build this house here? And he tries to interpret the spirits and say, yes, you can build your house in this place or no.

or the waters, are they alive, are they clean, they are not. So I really was loving so much all this deep, deep, deep. And the people that are not living in the forests or mountains, they should learn so much about this, about the spirituality, because it's not a mental approach, it's not a psychological approach, it's a spiritual approach, direct, true. That's what it is.

And that's so important. And then there is another level. The other level is about the religions community that are together defending the forest. And this is another issue, very important. When the religions are coming together and in coalition, they can have a voice, much better voice. So we saw we could meet this experience of religions working together.

and I think this should be an example to be taken in every situation and we should support them so they can improve and do even better.

AnE Film Festival (22:29)

And does, I mean, you know, some of the criticisms people may have of the situation is obviously the historic issues with religion and indigenous people.

And also now, of course, with the environmental crisis, we need to change the way we're living. But many people around the world who want to towards what we have in the Western industrialized countries. I'm not sure what my question is, but how does the...

Lia Beltrami (22:53)

Okay.

I know, know, I know.

Yeah, that's good because my daughter working in Oxford and coming from the university, they always discuss about this point. And in history, in the past, there was always, and also in some situations where the word missionary comes immediately to conquerors. And that's a reality and I don't deny it. And I criticize this part so much.

But from the other side, I want also to say that I met a lot of religious people, even coming from the West, the North, be there and trying to support and protect and do all the efforts. For

example, we have most of the transcription of indigenous languages are by old missionaries that they wrote dictionaries.

That's the first way. Now we have all technical means, but in the last past century to put down vocabulary, to write down grammar of local languages is like how to preserve and how to survive. Or for example, in the Catholic after second council, it was in the 60s that it was said

so strong that religion should always accept 100 % the local culture and change, transform the values in the local culture. So values are values, are love, love forgive your enemy and

the rule of law, but you have to interpret it in all the different cultures. Inculturalization is kind of a difficult word. So I saw also this part. But also I've seen people that they are deeply spiritual in their ancient tradition and they decided to be in the church or to be in the mosque or to be

or to go in the Buddhist, I mean the big religions let's say. I found all people very free. I never met situations of anything forced. Sometimes, you know, even local traditions are not easy. And sometimes to go in a more easy religion, if it's your own choice, I mean, for example, in one of the tribes, the...

The boys, when they become 12 or 13 or 14, they put in a bag, like a bag full of... Sometimes they put their arms or they are putting this bag full of ants that they bite and they faint for the pain and they have to stay there until they faint and they do this for days and days until they get mad for the pain, for example. This is an example.

That's why I don't say that everything comes from indigenous tradition is good and healthy and not at all. I respect every tradition, but sometimes maybe one person decides to follow something more easy that don't bring. But the important is that there must be for everyone the deep connection with the ancestors and the wisdom. And I think now it's a good time for this. It's a good time.

It was not in the past, now it's good time and we have to defend it. When we find aggressive attitude of any religion, any religion or any sect, not only religions, religions and sects, we have to stand for freedom. Religious freedom is such an important point.

AnE Film Festival (26:52)

I suppose the other half of the question I think I was trying to ask is what is the responsibility that we have to indigenous people in the sense that historically we're responsible for terrible things and now it feels like there's a lot we can learn in dealing with the state the world is in but...

Lia Beltrami (27:15)

Yeah, the responsibility is so big because still now, okay, you eat biscuits with palm oil. You know that probably this palm oil comes from Borneo. And from Borneo, an indigenous family

should have sold their land to survive. So we have a responsibility in this. We can also support local associations and projects to preserve the forest. But...

Every time we think about environment and about forests, we have immediately to think about indigenous people. We cannot just say, save the forest. Yeah, okay, save the forest. But first you have to create a way so that the indigenous people, they can survive. They can live in their forest. They can earn the money to be able to go to hospital, to school, to have a decent life. So parallel together with saving the forest,

or first, we have to save the people who lives in the forest. so it's very important to take decisions and to do actions, so to respect those who are living there and listen to their wisdom and listen to their solutions and listen to their voice. It's so hard nowadays to listen, listen, and we have to, we have to listen. I want them to add the one thing that I think it's important.

The film focuses on women. We see three different approaches completely of women. We have in Amazonia the leaders. The women are leaders. Unfortunately many men are addicted to alcohol or are absent from the scenario. So we have the indigenous women leaders and they are very strong and maybe helped also by the religions who gave them the floor.

and this is also an aspect. Then we have in Congo, Pygmy women, have no voice. Every time they start to speak, there is a male voice that repeats the same louder. So that you cannot... We left it as it was in the documentary because we wanted that people see how women do not exist. So we have also a responsibility for these women. We have to help them to raise their rights.

The two women we put in the last of the editing were the women that they were helped in that situation by the church to have a voice to be out of the male-driven community. again, even the African churches need to give space to women and to give leadership to women. That's also another issue. And then in Borneo, we found a completely

harmony between men and women. When we spoke about do we have problems as women and they looked at us and said no we don't know what's the difference between men and women we are we have same rights and so there we can learn a lot from indigenous communities of the Borneo to have really a respect between men and women.

AnE Film Festival (30:35)

Absolutely. So I guess we're going to have to wrap up fairly soon, aren't we? So is there, if somebody watching the film or listening to this, there, there, what would you say is the first thing people should be doing?

Lia Beltrami (30:51)

I think the first thing you should be doing is going and getting information directly as much as you can. Because there is a lot of greenwashing and everyone is sustainability and ecological

and you don't get much information so the fact that you are watching a film is the first step. You take your time to listen and that's the first. And then you can

take an action, I hope people can take an action, maybe they can go to interfaith rainforest initiative for example, or different initiatives that they are doing small steps and do that. Or maybe just pick, if we do a minor minor change in our daily life, you know the forest out there, you see the dangers in which are the forests, so if we take just only maybe switching off one more light or

When we fly, example, we always choose the CO2 compensation for the flight. So it's one small action each of us can really support all this movement.

AnE Film Festival (32:00)

It's start, it's always a start, isn't it? Yeah. So you've told us a little bit already about what you're doing next. When does that film come out, you know?

Lia Beltrami (32:03)

Yeah.

So,

next week it will have a preview. Yeah, it will have a preview and also we have another film coming out. So we have the coming from two films. This Green Lava is very important because it's a message for especially people who are afraid of death. So mostly everyone and talking together or listening to a boy 21 when we did the filming this summer.

AnE Film Festival (32:12)

next week.

Lia Beltrami (32:38)

on this point is, I mean, it can help or it can shock, it can, I hope it can provoke a change and also for inclusion and disability and even to learn from a person like him. It's a way very important, I hope. And then the other project is

called Baima and it's about dance and it's about Brazil, it's about the producer, local producer who's in Guardians of the Rainforest. He's a dancer from my favela and now he started an institute to help the people in the favela to come out of violence through dance. So it's for children, it's prevention for...

violence against women, so how to teach the boys to dance through the body, how to respect the body of the women, and then for women who suffered violence to take out the pain through dance, and then for kids who are in a drug, how to come out through dance. And so this is a long feature documentary and this will come out, I hope, this summertime.

AnE Film Festival (33:54)

I just remembered the other question I scribbled down. We've got a couple of minutes. So it was it was more thinking about, you know, the logistics that you went through to get

and everything you're saying about making all the films you've made before. If you were somebody who's starting out trying to make film, how do you do it? What is it that makes it possible?

Lia Beltrami (34:28)

So I think first of all is a point of collecting all the information you have, that it's not... chat gpt gives you first information, books, but then start with books, with videos.

and then start talking on video. Now there is all these calls that it was not in the past. When I started 34 years ago, it was not like this. You had first to go and meet the people, talk to the people, listen, record, collect everything, and then make up your mind and then start to plan the film. Now you don't need to go there before. That's so good.

most of the time you can meet the people and you can create your own league like this and you can have someone making this for you on the field so you save on flights and then the important is very much for me is not try to demonstrate your own idea we have enough of that we have enough so rather

build your idea, collect everything you have, go on the field and let everything disappear and let yourself immerse in all that you get. for budget is always difficult so it's good to do crowdfunding, it's good to find film funds but also try to involve privates because maybe a company

Okay, they are not used to sponsor a documentary on Amazonia, but maybe if you are good to persuade them, it's their part. They invest in creating awareness and investing in creating awareness, it's so important. It's like doing something. So it's important to put also the privates in this story and then plan as much as you can, but then let the world tell you how it is.

AnE Film Festival (36:36)

Excellent advice, thank you. Yeah, that's great. It's been really great to talk to you. I think anyone listening will be rushing off to watch the whole...

menu of your films. We'll include links to where we can find all those.

Lia Beltrami (36:51)

Thank you so much for what all you are doing because it's thanks to festivals like your film festival that we can go around and spread the message. Otherwise other channels may not be what we are looking for. It's because we can have this chance that really it's worth it to go in the forest and to get lost in the forest because you exist.

AnE Film Festival (37:13)

Great, thank you. It's been brilliant.

A&E Film Festival (37:24)

You can find out more information about today's film and all the other films in the A & E Film Festival by searching on the website, [www.aneff.org.uk](http://www.aneff.org.uk)