

**One World, One Health Podcast  
Episode 1, Season 1 - Transcript  
Guest: Dr. Kinari Webb**

## **Rainforests and Healthcare – Community-Based Solutions to Deforestation**

Maggie Fox:

Hello, and welcome to One World, One Health, where we bring you the latest ideas to improve the health of our planet and its people. I'm Maggie Fox.

Our planet faces many challenges: pollution, climate change, and new and reemerging infectious diseases like COVID. This podcast is brought to you by the One Health Trust, with bite-sized insights into ways to help planet Earth.

In this episode, we're talking to Dr. Kinari Webb, founder of Health in Harmony, who discovered a surprising link between providing health care and saving forests in Indonesia. Her organization is now also working with people living in Madagascar and Brazil.

Kinari, thank you for joining us.

Dr. Kinari Webb:

Thank you, Maggie. Thank you so much for having me. It's an honor to be here.

Maggie Fox:

You've met some of the people who are illegally cutting down trees in the forests of Borneo. Can you tell us why they feel they have to do this?

Dr. Kinari Webb:

You know, it's this really interesting thing. But I was totally shocked when I found out the reason that many of the people were logging: to pay for health care. I know one man who cut down 60 trees to pay for a C-section. One medical emergency costs an entire year's income.

I had a C-section last year and then there were some complications. And my son actually needed surgery as well. And even though I have excellent health insurance, we spent \$18,000. Right?

Even in, you know, one of the richest countries in the world, one medical emergency can be absolutely devastating. And that is the way it is for people all over the world. And if you just don't [have it] how are you going to get that money, right? If you are a subsistence farmer, you generally have enough money for your life and your livelihood. But then one emergency, you'll do anything. And, of course, that's the right thing to do.

Maggie Fox:

Can you tell us how the loss of these big old trees hurts animal and human health?

Dr. Kinari Webb:

So I was actually in Borneo, studying orangutans. And, of course, the trees are the home to these amazing creatures, but also home to incredible biodiversity.

These trees are important for the well-being of the communities around the forest and also for the well-being of the whole planet. They store enormous amounts of carbon in them. They also are important for regulating water that goes all over the world and have some of the most incredible biodiversity. In fact, these rainforests have half of the world's biodiversity.

Maggie Fox:

And the people who live in the forest — does having big trees around affect their health directly?

Dr. Kinari Webb:

It absolutely does. And there's a lot of data that's been showing that if the forest is intact, humans do much better. There's a lot of data on malaria rates decreasing. But there's also a decreased risk of spillover of novel zoonotic diseases.

For example, we all have experienced the [COVID] pandemic of late. And we're very aware of just how important it is that there not be these new viruses that could spread all over the world. And when the forest is very unstable and not doing well, that risk of spillover to communities is much higher. And then, of course, the forests are also very important for water quality. All of those things can really impact the health and well-being of communities around the forest.

Maggie Fox:

You found a really simple solution when you just asked people what they need.

Dr. Kinari Webb:

So I had gone there to study orangutans; I was totally surprised by this revelation. For me, at least, not for them. It was totally obvious to them that one of the main reasons you would have to illegally log would be to pay for health care.

So I actually ended up going to medical school, and then I returned. But I returned with this real understanding that I didn't really understand what was going on and that the local communities were the experts. And so what we did is we had a process of radical listening, where we would listen to communities all the way around the National Park. And we actually did 400 hours of listening in the first year of the program.

Now, we did so many hours partly because I thought every single community was going to come to a different answer about what the solutions were for protecting the forest. But actually, as it turned out, every community independently came to the same conclusions. And they said they needed access to high-quality, affordable health care. And they also needed training in organic farming as an alternative livelihood. And they said they thought with those two things, they would be able to stop logging.

Amazingly, 10 years later, we had a 90% drop in logging households. We had stabilization of the loss of the primary forest that saved \$65 million worth of carbon. There were also 52,000 acres of rainforest that grew back. And at the same time, there were, across the board, improvements in health, including a 67% drop in infant mortality.

What that basically says to me is the communities were right: They knew exactly what the solutions were. I call them the fulcrums of change — these key issues that would change everything for their communities. And as an outsider, there's no way I could have known what those were. That's why we do radical listening.

Maggie Fox:

So, you found that when people were able to pay for health care in an alternative way, they actually saw great improvements in their health, improvements in infant mortality, and in infectious diseases. Is that right?

Dr. Kinari Webb:

That's right. Malaria dropped dramatically as well. It's across-the-board improvements in health. And they stopped logging, right? The proof's in the pudding; they knew what the solutions were.

Maggie Fox:

Some people might think that less vegetation means a healthier way of living. Can you tell us how having an intact forest helps people's health?

Dr. Kinari Webb:

So, it's really interesting. When you have a very diverse ecosystem that's really healthy and stable, it's thriving and it's in balance. But when it gets out of balance, that's when you have lots of problems.

For example, in the little village where I lived for many, many years in Borneo, the forest behind my house had been heavily logged. And it was so full of mosquitoes I didn't even want to go in —probably because there were fewer frogs, they were on me. I don't even know all the reasons, right? But it was full of mosquitoes.

And the primary forests, the beautiful, old-growth forests where I had studied orangutans...there were very few mosquitoes because there were a lot of predators. And I don't know — the whole ecosystem was stable. So that's what you find — things can get out of balance. And I would say our whole planet is out of balance.

You need these rainforests to be healthy and strong for the whole planet. One of the things that we don't realize is that these forests create rivers in the air. They call them 'flying rivers', that go halfway around the planet.

And in California, part of the reason we're having a drought is actually because of the loss of the rainforest in the tropics. We don't realize how important these ecosystems are for balancing our whole earth. And that happens on a local basis and a global basis.

Maggie Fox:

Can you tell us a little bit about Health in Harmony?

Dr. Kinari Webb:

Yeah, so I founded this nonprofit called Health in Harmony to basically, in an anti-colonial manner, funnel resources from the global north back to rainforest communities. We have an imbalance of resources in our planet because, through colonialism, resources have been taken from these communities for a very long time. And so, the idea is that these communities know what solutions are. We can support them precisely, in a very specific manner.

For example, we exactly implemented the solutions that these communities in Borneo asked for. Over 10 years, we spent \$5.2 million. That's a lot of money, but it included an over \$2 million medical center. And in return, these communities gave back \$65 million worth of averted carbon loss.

That, you know, for me, is just representative of this mutual gift-giving that can happen around the planet. We can give these gifts to communities, of being able to support the solutions that they see. And in return, these communities are giving back an enormous gift to the world of a healthy planet. And so that's why we call it Health in Harmony; in harmony with the ecosystem.

Maggie Fox:

Kinari, thank you for sharing your insights.

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