

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. M. Sanjayan

JVN [00:00:02] Welcome to "Getting Curious". I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that gets me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by the CEO of "Conservation International", Dr. Sanjayan. Where I asked him, "How is the Amazon rainforest doing"? And just a quick note. This episode was recorded a couple of weeks before we had realized the full extent of the fires in Australia. And I just want to say that all of our hearts go out to anyone listening to this in Australia. And if you haven't had a chance to make a donation if that's something that's possible for you to do, please reach out to some of the many incredible organizations that are doing such great work in Australia for the people and for the wildlife that are suffering through this horrific natural disaster. So without any further ado, love you all so much. And we'll get started on this week's episode of "Getting Curious". Welcome to "Getting Curious". This is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm very excited for this week's episode. We have an incredible guest, who I'm going to introduce right now, Dr. Sanjayan. He is the "Conservation International" CEO and the Global Conservation Si- oh wait. Jesus Christ loves us. That's what my mom says. Just so I-, she's worried that I'll burn in hell if I just say "Jesus Christ" by itself. So I say loves us afterwards. But you are the literal CEO of "Conservation International".

DR. SANJAYAN [00:01:24] Yes, the literal CEO.

JVN [00:01:25] Yeah.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:01:26] As opposed to the non-literal CEO.

JVN [00:01:28] But I mean that's a pretty major title.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:01:30] It is. Actually, it is. I have to pinch myself. It's hard to believe that a kid from Sri Lanka, who grew up in Africa with like monkeys in the backyard, kind of made it here in some way and actually has a productive life.

JVN [00:01:44] Well, that's beautiful. And I think that's an incredible and that's like literally the American dream. So, yay. I'm so glad to have you. And I'm so glad that you are doing the incredible work that you're doing. So when I go to say you're all of the things that you have, honey.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:01:57] Yeah.

JVN [00:01:58] There is a lot. You have commas aplenty in your, in your credentials as an, as a scientist and educator. So do you want to just lay some of those on us?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:02:08] Yeah, sure. Look, as I said, I grew up in Africa all my life. It came to the U.S. for college, came to us just on our on almost on a lark, prompted by like a Bruce Springsteen album. I got like "Nebraska". That was the album that did it for me.

JVN [00:02:22] Wow.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:02:22] I was like, I need to see some place that is wide and open and where possibilities are there. You know? Did my undergrad here, University of Oregon, then did my PhD at UC Santa Cruz. Joined the Nature Conservancy, worked at the World Bank for a little bit, and then like six years ago came over to "Conservation International". And then three years ago, this was kind of the most maybe one of the most important moment of my life. The, the founder of the organization is kind of this legendary guy named Peter Seligmann. He's, he founded it and has run it for about 32 years, very successfully so. Built an amazing board, an amazing org. He stepped down. And that's a big moment in the organization's history, right? When the founder steps down. And I was incredibly honored and like totally humble that the board picked me, as well as a great new leadership team. My colleague Jennifer Morris and Sebastian Truong, two other people to help lead this organization.

JVN [00:03:16] And so also to not to-, just because you did say UC Santa Cruz, but what you didn't say was is what you're PhD is in, honey, which is ecology and evolutionary biology.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:03:25] Sure. Yeah. And my actual thesis work was in genetics.

JVN [00:03:29] Holy cr-. So is there any, is there any science you're not an expert on?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:03:32] Yeah, probably a lot. That's the thing about science, right? It always continually keeps evolving. So I'm sure there is.

JVN [00:03:39] But still, congratulations on all that.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:03:41] Thank you.

JVN [00:03:41] So just just to go back a little bit more, Conservation, "Conservation International" was originally established 30-?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:03:50] 33 years ago.

JVN [00:03:51] 33 years ago.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:03:52] Yeah.

JVN [00:03:53] And it was an organization that was meant to?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:03:56] Save species. Like, you know, we knew that things were disappearing on the planet. And there were these hotspots on the planet which had lots and lots of diversity. Diversity of animals and plants and conservation science there to go out and save them. They mostly were in tropical places, tended to have more diversity. And that's what the organization did and did it very well for many years until more recently when it made a big shift in its mission, which frankly is what ended up aligning my own values with where this organization is going, which is ultimately about human well-being. So I truly believe, like even though I love nature and I love being out in nature and I've got a little place in Montana and I like going out there because they're like grizzly bears there. And I like going for a walk in the woods, knowing that there's something bigger and scarier than me with teeth and fangs that can rip my head off.

JVN [00:04:45] Sounds fun.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:04:46] It's kind of exciting. But that proposition, right, that, you know, save nature might kill you. It just doesn't work for most of the world.

JVN [00:04:53] Right. Like I me, I think is what I just heard myself saying.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:04:55] And millions of people around the world. And the truth of the matter is, unless you can show value and not just love for nature, it's just not going to scale. And so for me, coming from, you know, a developing country, coming from, you know, Asia and Africa. And I grew up in like quite literally one of the poorest places on the planet, which is Sierra Leone in West Africa. You know, seeing what I saw there, I realized the end of the day, nature, saving nature is actually about saving humanity.

JVN [00:05:22] And that was what kind of the shift of "Conservation International" going from, like about saving specific species in diverse hotspots to go into like a more humanity-.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:05:30] It, going towards a place where we're saving nature because it actually helps improve human lives and human livelihoods. It's not that look, I, as I said, I love nature. And I think nature should exist for its own right. I really do believe that. But I also think that, you know, at the end of the day, you know, everything you and I do like, look, the water we have in front of us, the coffee I'm drinking right now, this table that's made out of wood, like everything around us, our jobs, our livelihoods, our well-being is ultimately connected to nature. And when nature stumbles, we feel it. And right now, we're starting to really feel it.

JVN [00:06:06] So tell me a little bit about what that means. Like I mean, obviously, I think I know, but I mean since-. OK. So we already knew prior to the election of 2016 that we were like in, in a climate change situation. I think that we've, I remember actually just a couple weeks ago, I was Googling the debates of 2000 because someone was telling me that they were actually debating climate change policy in the election of 2000. And they were. Like Bush and Gore were debating climate change in 2000. That was almost 20 years ago now. It's just crazy to think. But it's like so and I remember being a little a little kid and, you know, in Illinois in the early 90s and hearing about climate change and hearing that we had this big flood in 1993. And I remember people saying like this is like a 500 year flood and it shouldn't be this bad. So we've been having this conversation for a little while in time. I think the sense of urgency is starting to, to, you know, to spread out and more people are knowing about it. But it's like, in the last, I think with the election of Donald Trump and the rollbacks that he's made on the EPA and with the threats to the Clean Water Act, I mean, there's a lot of things that we're seeing here that are that, you know, would, I think would be considered to, safe to say is throwing gas on the fire, like making it, making climate change worse, maybe making it go faster, like by, you know, the continual, you know, coal use and fossil fuels and then the rollbacks of the protections on like drilling out in water and all of these things. But is that what the ratcheting up is that we're talking about? Or is it even before that or?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:07:35] You know, I think that's part of it. But here's where, the way I think about it. Right? Just as the world is waking up to this moment of transformation and change. And when I've always thought of America as the country that has always led the way, whether it's in science or technology or in-, industrialization or, you know, human rights, I mean, like any way you look at the U.S. was always a leader just when that was about happening with this big cataclysmic

problem that humanity was facing. We are ceding our real leadership. We're stepping back. We're stepping back. And in the long run, it's going to hurt jobs. It's going to hurt people here. It's going to hurt the globe. That kills me like that, like we've been fighting for this for a long time. And just when the world's like waking up, that's the moment America needs to step in and step up. Same thing with Brazil. That's the moment that Brazil needs to step in, step up. And guess what? We're sort of retreating. At least from a federal government point of view. I'll tell you something kind of amazing, right? Like right today. Today in Madrid, which is the big climate conference that's happening, like Mike Bloomberg's out there and he's delivering a report this afternoon and that report basically says that even though the federal government pulled back from Paris, from the Paris climate accord, America has actually managed to meet its obligations in spite of a federal government that is obstructionist because businesses, states, governors, communities have all rallied to meet the numbers. So it's like, you know, like it's kind of crazy, right? Like, we always think of ourselves as like pro-business. That's like an American thing. Business gets this. They want this to happen. And yet we are like dragging our feet.

JVN [00:09:23] And why-? I mean, that's basically because we have a president who's decides a lot of executive action. Isn't it?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:09:27] If you're going to ask me why that is. I look, I think that's a much, much harder question to answer. And I think, you know, as I said, you know, I have a place, a little place in Montana. I'll tell you something. And I remember driving around Montana and seeing the signs out there. And, you know, I saw lots of signs for Trump. I didn't really see any signs for Hillary Clinton. And I understood that there was a shift happening in kind of this heartland of this country. And I think there were people who were genuinely scared about the future. They were being left out of the economy. They're being left out of all the things that we think is really cool. And so what? You know, what, what is the risk for them for like tipping over the apple cart? Right?

JVN [00:10:08] Right.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:10:08] And I think the same thing happened in Brazil. I think there's like endemic corruption there-. I just got back from Brazil, day before yesterday that's why I'm like, it's on my mind. And you know, huge amount of corruption, huge amounts of sort of malaise. And it's not like people actually necessarily agree with everything that's happening. But there they're like, well, we might as well tip over the cart and see if anything different happens.

JVN [00:10:30] Well, so they elected. I always feel like I messed up his last name. Bols-.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:10:33] President Bolsonaro.

JVN [00:10:34] Bolsonaro. OK, so they elect him like what? Two years ago? Is like it was a year ago? Last year.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:10:42] Like a year ago. Yeah.

JVN [00:10:42] So and we saw, I mean, it was all over. I feel like it was like, you know, Notre-Dame burned down. And then there was all the fires in Amazon, in the Amazon and then everyone was like, y'all are so upset about the Notre-Dame, but no one's talking about this Amazon fire. And that was like the meme of August and September and October, I feel like. But, you know, the fires in

Brazil like weren't a meme and it's not-. And I also think it's interesting that so many people are so quick to get on their Instagram and their Twitter and be like, look at this crisis, look what's going on. It's like, did you donate to that? Or do you just put it on your Instastory? Like, because it's not the same. You know? You being outraged about something on your Twitter or like someone like, because a lot of people are like, well, why aren't you posting about this? And I mean, people said it to my friends, they also say it to me, but it's like maybe I'm donating. Maybe I'm doing something different. So it's like this idea of like, not, like what is actually going on on the ground in Brazil. Not from a meme or Internet place, you just got back yesterday. Were these fires in August and September typical? Is that their fire season? Is it like something we've never seen before? Like what is the state?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:11:46] Without a doubt that the mountain fires we're seeing now is the worst we've seen in over a decade. That's a surprise, because Brazil, in terms of protecting its forests, protecting indigenous people, was, and climate change, was heading in the right direction. It's actually a pretty clean energy country. They get most of the energy from hydro or from biofuels. So, you know, in terms of like, you know, its energy use, it's actually fairly clean. And in terms of forest protection, they were clearly a leader. Like we would all look at Brazil and be like, that's, that's the model that you need to follow, kind of reverse that and reverse it very, very quickly. So the fires today are really bad. There's like 28 hundred fires burning like right now in the Amazon. August, September were particularly bad months. It's always that those months that are bad. Look, the Amazon, it's constantly raining, right? It could rain every day in the Amazon. And there's always a slight, slight dry season. And during that time, farmers will cut down parts of the forest. They pile it all up and then they light it on fire. And they mostly do it for cattle because they want to bring cows and graze them. And then two, three years later, that land is kind of no good. And they go cut some more. So it's it's a very destructive practice of farming. This year has been the worst in over a decade, and it's made even worse because the signal that's been sent by the federal government is we don't care, go ahead and do whatever you want. And even it might actually be good for Brazil. Now, I understand like the coun-, the states that are mostly making up the Amazon, like the state of Amazonas, are Pará. These are poor, relatively poor states and people are trying to make a livelihood and a living. But this country kind of went from a leader in tropical forest conservation to really now kind of a global, you know, you know, almost a poster child for exactly what not to do. And they did it very quickly. And part of it was because the intransigence of just saying we don't really give it, we don't really care.

JVN [00:13:51] So what I just wrote down and what that makes me think of is the word "policy" and about how like one thing I learned is that like, you know, I could choose to, you know, use a reusable water bottle all day long until I'm blue in the face. Never drink out of a plastic bottle again. But as long as the American federal government keeps saying to the plastics lobby, "Keep making all the Fiji water, keep making all the plastic water bottles all you want". The idea that my personal choice or the consumer personal choice will ever be enough to reverse or get ahead of global warming. There's, so there's, there's that school of thought that says there's no amount of personal choice that will get in front of this unless there is sweeping policy change. There is no way that we can get the carbon emissions down and we can do what we need to do to like prevent that 2 degrees Celsius raise within like 100 years thing. So it's like. Policy, it's like the old policy of the former federal Brazilian government of like Temer and Louise-. Temer and then that and then that one lady who I liked her, do, that one lady, what was her-? But then she went in jail right at the same time as the Olympics were star-.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:15:01] Dilma.

JVN [00:15:01] Yes, Dilma. And then and then you had Temer after her. But now it's like you've got Bolsonaro and he's come in and he's removed all of the policies.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:15:09] Yeah.

JVN [00:15:10] So he's like do your slash and burn farming. No big deal. You're not going to see trouble from us.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:15:14] Yeah.

JVN [00:15:15] Another thing I learned about in the same regard was like when Reagan was the president in the 80s and he said, "Hey, if you want to break the back of your unions, you're not going to hear trouble from the White House". Like if you want to ship your, your jobs across seas, like no problem here. Like, that was kind of what he did.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:15:28] Yeah.

JVN [00:15:29] In the in the economy of the 80s. So. What do you do? How do we-?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:15:35] Yeah. So, look, I personally think that, you know, personal choice does matter. Right? I think it does send a signal. And if you're acutely aware of the things you buy and the things you, you know, subscribe to, it does make you a more sensitive or a more awakened human being to the issues that are around the globe. There's no way, you're absolutely right. You can't just make personal sacrifices and expect the problem to be solved, especially one of this magnitude. The challenge is absolutely we gotta, we gotta have policy that backs up what I think businesses are now willing to do. Right? So you can work on like trying to get like, you know, take palm oil. Right? Like we know it's like it contributes to deforestation. You can get a company like Unilever or Mars or whoever to like say, look, we're gonna try to make sure our palm oil does not lead to deforestation. But unless the countries governments also then back it up with policy, people will then cut the forest for something else.

JVN [00:16:32] Right.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:16:33] So you just, you cannot ever think about sustainability just as something either personal choice or company or government. It has to be all three. It's the community, it's businesses and government. And that's where we always, always seem to stumble.

JVN [00:16:49] We're gonna be right back with more of Dr. Sanjayan after the break. Welcome back to "Getting Curious", this is me, Jonathan Van Ness, and we have Dr. Sanjayan, the CEO of "Conservation International". Wow. So basically what I hear you saying is that it will, it's, it is policy. It is personal choice. And it is like company values. All three of those things are like co-equals of the government for carbon emission reducing and everything.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:17:23] Yeah. And companies. So interestingly, I think they are actually getting the message faster than-. Because, you know, most companies just deal with data and so they, they're quite rational in some ways. And I actually think companies are moving faster than the

American consumer is willing to move right now, which is a really interesting position. And certainly they're moving much faster than the federal government is willing to move. And that's insane.

JVN [00:17:47] Well, I mean, that kind of makes sense, though, because it's like companies are moving where they think the dollar is going to go. And they, if they think that the perception is that they want a more sustainable whatever, but the government is, I mean.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:17:56] Yeah.

JVN [00:17:56] It seems like the companies would move quicker with money than what the government would.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:17:59] If you want to sell salmon to the American consumer. You better make sure there's salmon always available to sell. Which means it has to be sustainable.

JVN [00:18:08] So how does the, how does the rel-, like America's government or the average American, have any ability to affect what's going on in the Amazon rainforest?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:18:20] You're asking a Sri Lanka by way of Sierra Leone to talk about what, how an American can do something?

JVN [00:18:28] Well, you're the-. I'm actually asking the CEO, "Conservation International".

DR. SANJAYAN [00:18:32] Fair enough.

JVN [00:18:33] What? I mean, here you are here. I'm asking about what's going on in the Amazon.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:18:37] Yeah.

JVN [00:18:37] And policy in the Amazon. Most of my listeners are in America.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:18:42] Yeah.

JVN [00:18:42] Some may be Brazilian. Most are not.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:18:45] Yeah.

JVN [00:18:45] Some are Australian. Some are from here and there. What can other people glean from this?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:18:51] Yeah. And I'm just only saying that to just be, you know, mindful that, you know, it's not like I can dictate for the whole, you know like there's things I can wish for, but, you know, it's just hard to do. So I think that you have to take personal responsibility. So that has to happen. You should be aware of how you spend your money. You should be aware of what companies you're supporting and what you're buying. And if they're not doing it right, ask them why they're not doing it that way. So personal pressure can make a big difference in the trajectory of a company. The second thing is you've got to get involved politically. There's just no doubt about it. You got to get involved politically. The thing that kills me the most in some ways is that

we've made the environment and conservation in particularly more recent years a starkly partisan issue. That's insane, because no matter how you cut it, it means you're going to leave half the country out. And I don't wanna leave anyone out. This is fundamentally going to affect farmers in Iowa, just as much going to affect people in California. Just as much as it's going to affect people right here in New York City. So we all have to be in it and we have to make this, the questions you ask your politicians. Ask them to get involved. I can agree that different parties might have a different solution to the problem. That's fine. But both have to be talking about.

JVN [00:20:09] Whereas it seems like now, at least in America, the Republican side is very much like this isn't happening, like this is normal and like there's always been climate change despite men or whatever. And the Democrats are saying like, no, we really need to invest in this. And it could be jobs, and it could help us with our future. And it's like one is just completely denying that it's happening at all.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:20:26] That piece is just insane. Like it's insane for people to say that the science isn't strong. That it's still debatable. It isn't debatable. That's what Greta Thunberg's protest is all about. Right? Kids in school basically saying, "Why do you want me to go to school if what you're teaching me in school you're saying is actually, you know, not true"? Right? I mean, it's insane. So that has to-, even, even in Brazil. Even in Brazil, the, the federal government does not deny climate change. That's interesting. Here we actually have people who at least say that they deny climate, the climate science. That science is solid, that science is good. You have basically every scientist on the planet across the globe basically saying this is real. China, Russia, United States, the Middle East, you know, so why in this country, which is a leader in science, do we still have politicians saying, "Well, I don't know about the climate science? It could be a little this, could be a little that". Let's get over that. Let's disagree on what the solution is. Let's not disagree on whether this is a problem. because it's a problem, and it's going to bite us.

JVN [00:21:33] So if we think about Brazil as a case study in this, specifically, we have, is the practice of farmers or moving trees and then burning them. Is that that whole slash and burn thing that I remember learning about in school?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:21:46] Yeah, it's partly that. So it seems insane to me that in, in today's world we still have to cut down intact forests in order to grow food.

JVN [00:21:56] So is that what's happening with these fires?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:21:57] That's what's happening. People are cutting down forests. And by the way, this is not just in the Amazon or in Brazil. This is happening globally, it's happening in, in the Asian forest. It's happening certainly in the Congo. People cut it down. They piled it up. Then they burn it, because they've got to get rid of it. And then they grow something for maybe a couple of years or put cows on there for a few years. And then after that, that soil is all washed away and they go do it again. And the rate at which they're doing it, like right now can imagine, like an area the size of New York City that is like Staten Island, Queens, like the whole boroughs. All of them is disappearing from the Amazon every month. Every month. It's massive.

JVN [00:22:38] And how long would it take to replace or to reforest a size, Ama-, like so let's say the farmer went in and took out everything. I mean, just like farm the shit out of it, like it's barren land.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:22:48] Yeah.

JVN [00:22:49] And then let's say someone like "Conservation International" went in and like put like 80 million different types of trees in there and put it like some chupacabra, not the chupacabra, what's that big guinea pig looking thing?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:22:57] I believe-. Yeah, capybara.

JVN [00:22:59] Yeah. The capybara.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:23:00] Not to be mixed with the chupacabra.

JVN [00:23:00] Not the chupacabra.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:23:00] Which is a mythical beast from Mexico.

JVN [00:23:04] Yes of course, not the same thing. But let's say you put in all the animals back, honey, you put-, like how long, would it take 100 years for the trees to grow back as big as they were?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:23:11] Probably less than that. So, so here's the kind of good news. You know, if you go back into history, you realize that many millions of people used to live in the Amazon, that even by the time, like Western explorers got there. Disease had spread in front of those explorers and had basically decimated indigenous populations. Right? So much of the Amazon was under some form of cultivation historically. So you can restore it, but only to a point. And it currently costs a lot of money to do that. It's expensive. So "Conservation International", working with partners has the biggest tropical restoration project going on in the world. In the Amazon, in a region called the Zhengzhou. And this, it's, it's 73 million trees. That's what we're trying to reforest. Right? And it's about 30,000 hectares of forest that we're bringing back. It's expensive. So we need to improve the science and the technology and the method by which you do it, because it's not like a temperate forest, like if you go up to like British Columbia or you go up to like, you know, even in New York, you're trying to bring back a temper forest. It's like a few species of trees, sometimes just one like Douglas Fir, you can fly a plane and scatter the seeds and many of them will grow. In the Amazon, it's like hundreds of species of trees and everything, as you said, from capybara to chupacabras running around. So building that ecosystem is quite difficult, but it can be done. Now, here's the problem with the Amazon, though. What we're doing right now is we're approaching a tipping point. There's new science that says that you don't have to destroy all the Amazon to make it disappear. And if you destroy more than 20 percent of it and we're getting close to that, it changes the climate. See, when you're a tropical rainforest, you sweat. You sweat re-, you sweat basically water into the atmosphere. So it produces rain. So that's why, like in the Amazon, it rains literally every day. As you destroy more of the Amazon, you get beyond 20 percent. It just makes the whole place a lot drier. And so it converts the rainforest into savanna. And once that conversion starts happening, you can't reverse it because you can't really change rainfall. That's the danger. If

we exceed about 20, 25 percent of the Amazon destroyed, it will tip into a new system and you'll never be able to get it back.

JVN [00:25:29] And the Amazon rainforests is like the, it's the biggest rain forest.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:25:32] Oh, by far. It's the size like of the United States. It's bigger than the Congo and the Indonesian forest put together. And it's the lungs of the earth and it's like, you know, one fifth of all the birds live there. You know, one tenth of every fish lives there. I mean, it's, it's the diversity of life is basically in those cathedrals of trees.

JVN [00:25:50] So basically the, the Amazon Sustainable Landscapes Project. Or Amazon Sustainable Landscapes Project is what you were just talking about.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:25:57] Yeah. It's basically re-, reforestation program, working with indigenous communities that live in the forest to collect 200 species of seeds and try and reforest it. It's kind of like a giant experiment, but even 30,000 hectares, which sounds like a lot, is actually not that much. It's like a drop in the ocean compared to what we need to do. But it's kind of the biggest one we have right now.

JVN [00:26:19] And it's like the best example to see like, does this form of reforestation work? Like will these trees-

DR. SANJAYAN [00:26:23] And how can we make it cheaper.

JVN [00:26:25] Right.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:26:25] You've got to make it cheaper if you don't make it cheaper and put people to work. You're not going to have the incentives to do it.

JVN [00:26:31] So how can people that, you know, don't have voting power in Brazil? Would it be like just donating to "Conservation International"?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:26:39] Yeah. So in Brazil, interestingly, there is actually, you know, and maybe not unsurprising, there's quite a strong environmental movement and there's many, many people and business in Brazil who really are involved in the Amazon. By the way, I should also mention the Amazon, only about half of it, 60 percent is in Brazil. The rest is in other countries like Bolivia and Colombia and Peru and Ecuador, Suriname, Guyana. These are really important countries to protect the Amazon as well.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:27:05] So get, engage, donate to good causes that support the Amazon. Ask for details of what your money is being used for and then be careful about what you buy. You know, be thoughtful about the products you're buying, everything from soy to beef to chocolate to cocoa to palm oil.

JVN [00:27:24] So for Americans that partake in those, buying those goods, you could be unknowingly contributing to the deforestation of the Amazon and not even know.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:27:32] Very likely you could be. You certainly are contributing to deforestation somehow. And it very likely could be in the Amazon. Should ask the companies that you're buying this from, you know, how can you guarantee that the supply chain you have is deforestation-free? It's not perfect, but pushing companies to do that makes a big difference.

JVN [00:27:53] Dr. Sanjayan, we're gonna be right back with more of you and more of "Getting Curious" right after the break. Welcome back to "Getting Curious", this is Jonathan Van Ness. Dr. Sanjayan CEO of "Conservation International". So where do you, I mean, your work has taken you all over the place.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:28:20] Yeah.

JVN [00:28:21] Tell us a little bit about how did you get here.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:28:23] So the big epiphany for me was when I was in in West Africa, I was walking through the rainforest actually doing a-, so I do documentary films for like PBS and the BBC and Discovery Channel. That sort of the thing. And I was doing a documentary for the BBC. You know, the famous scientist, David Attenborough?

JVN [00:28:38] Of course.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:28:39] Right. So I was following in his footsteps. So his break in television happened in West Africa. And I was literally in the same village that he got his break in when he was 27 years old and kind of following in his footsteps for the show. And I came into a little village and I saw a bunch of kids and they had a dead monkey and they were burning the fur off that monkey in order to put into a pot. Like eight or nine kids around. And it was a small, smoky flame. And they fanning the flames furiously with a piece of metal that they cut from some signboard that you see all of Africa. I took a photo of this. The signboard that they were using, the little piece of metal had on it. The words WFP, which stands for the "World Food Program and like the blue wreaths that you see. And it struck me like a light bulb that these kids were basically using the signboard of the "World Food Program" to fan the flames of fire on which they were roasting a monkey, which is what they were going to eat. Now, this was in a country that had just come through a decade of really brutal civil war. And I realized that at the end of the day, when governments fail, when aid agencies fail, it's nature that provides people with the ultimate safety net. And that, for me was the big switch when I realized that saving nature is ultimately about saving ourselves.

JVN [00:30:02] It really seems like it's like a, it's like both. Like you really can't say, you can't save humans without saving nature.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:30:09] Hundred percent.

JVN [00:30:09] And you can't save nature without, like they both.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:30:12] Yes.

JVN [00:30:12] But Mother Nature could theoretically save herself and just kill the fuck out of all of us.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:30:16] They, definitely can. Look, life on earth is gonna be fine. Like, believe me, the planet will be fine. It'll get on with it. It'll evolve. What is really screwed is us. And I don't want that. You know, I got a five year, five month old baby and I look at her life and the stuff that we're doing to the planet today and that she has to live with, that is just not fair. And that's what I don't want.

JVN [00:30:39] Where do you see? I mean. Because one thing I always find myself thinking about is like I just I come from a place in this country that there's a lot of conservative people, there's a lot of people that just they don't see the effects of climate change. The flood of '93, they're like, well, that was a, we haven't had one since. Even though there is and we see floods in Houston. I mean, you're preaching to the choir. So I believe. I'm not a nonbeliever. But what do you say to the climate change deniers? I mean, do we not, do we attempt to try to convince them? What if there's someone in your life who you care about who just does not see? Like, for instance, there's someone in my life who I love a lot, who like, they're, they are not interested in getting a reusable water bottle. Water bottles are just what is in that person's habit. They go to, they go to their Starbucks. They go to whatever fast food chain. They're like, Throw a Dasani in there. I want a bottle of water". They do not see themselves as. Not sustainable, they don't see themselves as a bad person, in fact I think this person would think that they're really doing a lot for the environment in a lot of ways.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:31:38] Yeah.

JVN [00:31:39] Whereas when I see them, I'm like, "Why are you, why do you have a different water bottle every time I see you"? So it's like, how do we get people to take responsibility for a, for a crisis that they maybe don't see or don't believe in?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:31:51] So there's two groups of people. One are truly climate deniers. I got no patience for that. And you've got to work around them or work beyond them. If they're going to carry water bottles and buy a new one every single time. Then talk to the companies that are selling those water bottles. Right? There's a different way to approach that problem and the, the amount of energy you're going to spend trying to get that one person who's denying something to now not deny it will be exhausting. I don't think most Americans are that way. I don't think most people on the planet are that way. I think most people on the planet who are who don't want to take action are in the "I am scared. I'm not so sure what to do about it" category. I think that's where, whether they'll say it or not.

JVN [00:32:31] I think it's more of like, well, maybe I'm saying the same thing as you, but it's like I feel like I see a lot of people that just don't see how they're using plastic water bottles are contributing to the climate crisis.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:32:42] That's true. I mean, they, there's this notion that.

JVN [00:32:44] Or eating beef, you know? Or chocolate or whatever.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:32:47] Yeah. I mean, there's just a general sense that someone else will take care of the problem. And it's, even if it is not a big problem. So, I mean, I think that does take, you know, strong voices. The people that who are they most likely to believe are their peers. You're

most likely to believe your family members, your neighbors, people in your church, people in your school. So you have to find one of the big challenges I have with the environmental movement. And you can tell this. And you know, I'm brown, right? Go look out there. Not a lot of people who are not white male. I would actually say not white, heterosexual male, slightly older, who are really in the environmental movement and are willing to put their voice out there. So we need a lot of different people to contribute to this. So that's one of the big challenges. They're much less likely to, for example, listen to me, for ex-, if I look like them, I worship in a different place they worship in, I don't believe have the same common values. But I think that most of the folks that you're talking about, you know, like, look, I spend a lot of time on California farms. You go out on those farms and those people like they get something's changing. They're a bit worried about it and they don't know what to exactly do about it. I think they they are kind of like that silent majority that we need to figure out a way to tune on, because ultimately this is about job creation. It's about a better economy. It's about a more sustainable life and so on.

JVN [00:34:17] So. Two fold for for nearing as we're gonna be wrapping up. What do you see as the-. So what I hear you just saying right then is that we need more people in the climate change conversation to get it more mainstream. To get more people talking about it so that more people can be involved in this conversation.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:34:37] And different kinds of people, different types of people, different races, different sexuality, different political backgrounds. That's the key. You have to have people who look, sound, act a little bit like you in order for you to be willing to listen to that message.

JVN [00:34:51] So we got to figure out how to make Republicans rich off climate change, cause that'll get a lot-.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:34:54] And that's not even that hard. I mean, that's the crazy shit about this, right? Like the cost of energy is plummeting because we can do. The United Arab Emirates, a country that absolutely made its wealth on oil, is the number one investor in wind turbines in Europe. They have the largest solar farm on the planet. Now, think about that. If the UAE, a country that entirely made its wealth from oil, is investing so massively in this new tech. Don't you think they're onto something? We absolutely can get rich on this. Not rich, just rich. We can get more sustainable. We can have you no longer like ability to do things like it's just. And why we, why are we giving up on it? Why we like backing out just now?

JVN [00:35:42] Do you think it's a partisan issue? I mean, is it partisan?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:35:45] I think it's just got to this point where everything has become partisan. It's got to this point where, you know, you just cannot. Yeah. I mean, it has to be. Like it, that's what's happened. Right? I mean, and that's what kills you. Like, look, you take defense. We take education the most part. All political parties agree that it should be a priority. You come to climate change and a lot of politicians, not just in this country, around the world, will take another side. That's what kills us.

JVN [00:36:16] So what is the biggest? What is it? Like is it going to be until like all of our forests are on fire and we're actively swimming in a world that is nothing but ocean before we start to like, like what do you think is going to be what it takes to get everyone involved?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:36:30] Sometimes I'm really optimistic. There's occasional times when I get really depressed because I can sort of see that, you know, that we're a little too late moment. I don't think that's there yet. I do think that for me, the way to get all parties to really understand this is one. Is two things. One are businesses. I think about businesses from Wal-Mart to Starbucks to Disney to Tiffany's to Apple, who all came out and said, we're in it. Even if you're gonna pull us out of Paris, we're still in it. That was a big signal. The second thing is, I think youth. There is a genuine movement happening today, and that's amazing. The young people there, they're scared and they're angry. And I was in London just like a couple of weeks ago, Extinction Rebellion. It basically shut down Lon-. Two thousand people shut down London. Like just shut it down. That was impressive. So I think we need more direct action. We need that political pressure. And I think that's what's going to change political parties.

JVN [00:37:30] So at this point, my podcast I always like-. Well, not always, because sometimes I talk too much with sometimes towards the end of the podcast, I'll say to the guests, have ever been to yoga? You ever like to go to yoga?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:37:38] Yoga? I have done yoga a few times.

JVN [00:37:41] Sometimes when I used to go to as one teacher and he would say, "Okay, like these last few minutes of classes like for yogi recess. If like there's something that you really wanted to practice or try. But I didn't teach it today. And like, you want to go over to a wall and practice your handstands, like you get these two minutes for it". Is that, what's your yoga recess for us today? Like, if I, have I miss anything? Like what you want people to know, like, is there, is there anything that like we missed that like you are super passionate talking on right now?

DR. SANJAYAN [00:38:03] The most amazing thing about this last hour we spent together is the level at which you understand and are willing to talk about climate change and what's happening to the planet. I'm genuinely walking out of here feeling more optimistic than when I came in. And that is very rare for me to do when I'm in front of the television camera or on a podcast, because usually the questions are so depressing that you walk out feeling worse about life. So I, I really mean that. I really mean that, like the audience you reach is not necessarily the audience that I have. And that matters.

JVN [00:38:42] Well, I hope that they all take something really important from this, and that's that we really have to elect leaders who are conscientious on climate change. It's just so, I mean, because I think I think in America at least, where I think I know the most about America. You know, policy wise and like what I know about my experience, it's like I do think that we're past a point of personal choice to be able to save what we're doing with the amount of plastic that we're wasting with our carbon footprint as a country until and and we're even seeing it now. I mean, the Trump administration like, you know, inexplicably, for, you know, a GOP or Republican, it's like you're supposed to really champion states rights. So California did it states rights and, you know, said these are what the emissions that we're going stand by. And now the Trump administration said, hey, that's too strict. And so they're trying to like undo this climate change sustainability work that the state of California decided that it wants to do. So it's like I think that until we have a federal government and state governments that are willing to put their money where their mouth is on climate change, it's like I don't think unless we all really just. But that's the other thing is like, 'cause that's the thing on climate change, it's so tricky is that it like it's such an intersection of like privilege, what your resources are, where you're from. It's a lot easier to be sustainable like where

there's sustainable options, than it is to be like, you know, if you're in a smaller rural place. Right? You know, they don't, they only sell plastic bags. Like you've got to get to work somehow. It's like, it's just it's such a complicated, thing to-

DR. SANJAYAN [00:40:08] It's a challenge that like, look, all of us have to be part of it. And I just refuse to believe that there's some part of this country or this planet who, who doesn't, who is not going to be impacted by this. And so we need everyone in the game. Just don't sit this out. And if you care about the Amazon or care about tropical forest than for me, you know, come to "Conservation International", look at what we do, support our work. It really does make a difference. I've seen it on the ground.

JVN [00:40:34] I mean, I believe it. And thank you so much for your time, Dr. Sanjayan. I really appreciate you.

DR. SANJAYAN [00:40:38] Thanks Jonathan.

JVN [00:40:38] Thank you so much. You've been listening to "Getting Curious" with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Dr. M. Sanjayan. You'll find links to his work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quin. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend, honey. Introduce two, three, four, five, maybe even and show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter at CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak. "Getting Curious" is produced by me, Julie Carrillo, Rae Ellis, Chelsea Jacobson and Colin Anderson.