News
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A man collects water from the Athi River near Yathui, Kenya, in October. He will use the wate

A man collects water from the Athi River near Yathui, Kenya, in October. He will use the water to irrigate crops on dry farmland. (CNS photo/Fredrick Nzwili)



by Barbara Fraser

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Editor's Note: *EarthBeat Weekly is your weekly newsletter about faith and climate change. Below is the Dec. 10 edition. To receive EarthBeat Weekly in your inbox, sign up here.*

I once heard environmental justice advocate Robert Bullard refer to communities of color that were surrounded by industrial pollution as "invisible communities," lacking political and economic power.

Years later, I mentioned this to Fr. Miguel Angel Cadenas, an Augustinian priest who is now bishop in Iquitos, Peru's largest Amazonian city, with regard to Indigenous communities in his sprawling parish that had been affected by oil spills along the

Marañón River.

Cadenas did not care for the term. Those communities weren't invisible, he told me — they were perfectly visible. Rather, he said, they were *invisibilizadas* — made invisible — by government officials, company executives and others who chose not to see them.

I recalled his words this week when I heard Indigenous leaders and environmentalists present a proposal for protecting a forested corridor the size of the U.S. state of Georgia along the border of Peru and Brazil. Besides conserving a huge swath of intact forest, with high biodiversity, it would protect a region that is home to the world's largest concentration of semi-nomadic Indigenous people who continue to shun contact with wider society in the two countries.

During the presentation, Indigenous leaders from both sides of the border described constant incursions by drug traffickers, illegal loggers and poachers who hunt and fish in protected areas and Indigenous reserves, endangering the lives of the isolated groups and the livelihoods of settled communities.

Indigenous leaders drew attention at the U.N. climate conference in Glasgow in November, while their requests for enforcement of laws protecting their rights at home have gone unheeded. Politicians, in effect, choose not to see them.

In matters of environmental and climate justice, words matter, as biologist and ethicist Christiana Zenner of Fordham University said in a presentation about humanitarian action and climate change in October at Fairfield University in Connecticut.

Even using the word "we" — as in "we must address the climate crisis" — is deceptive, she said, because too often it is assumed to be collective, when in fact it refers to a dominant culture — mainly white, male and Euro-American — that does not experience the crisis the same way as women, Indigenous people or communities of color.

"We know that the pursuit of climate justice is inextricable from the pursuit of racial justice. We know that the regions and peoples who feel climate changes first, and are most drastically affected by it, are often those who have done the least to accelerate it," Zenner said.

Sometimes this is recognized — NCR environment correspondent Brian Roewe writes this week about an award granted by Georgetown University to Patricia Espinosa, who heads the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, who has spoken out repeatedly about the connection between women's rights and climate justice.

Often though, those most affected continue their struggle out of the spotlight.

Zenner also cautioned against speaking of "climate change" or a "climate crisis," when actually there are multiple changes and many crises, and they have been experienced differently by people in different places since long before U.S. media caught on to the urgency.

"The diverse ways the climate changes and crises play out are plural, injustices are plural in the diversities of contexts and human lives," she said.

Participants in the annual Qoyllur Rit'i pilgrimage in Peru in 2009 look at a glacier at the pilgri

Participants in the annual Qoyllur Rit'i pilgrimage in Peru in 2009 look at a glacier at the pilgrimage destination high in the Andes Mountains. Decades earlier, the glacier extended to the place where they are standing, but a warming climate is shrinking most of Peru's glaciers. (EarthBeat/Barbara Fraser)

Long before Hurricane Ida's aftermath flooded subway lines and basement apartments in New York City in September, people in places like Bangladesh were dealing with rising sea levels and severe storms, while millions have been displaced by drought, flooding and crop failure in African countries and in Central America.

Those people are generally called climate migrants, Zenner notes — not refugees. And that matters, because refugees have specific rights under international law, while migrants do not. "This is a huge moral and political issue for the international community to deal with," she said.

I recommend watching her entire presentation, perhaps with your family or faith group. Advent is a good time to reflect on the interconnections between environmental injustices and other inequities. Here's the link again, if you missed the one above.

"As Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si*', everything is connected," Zenner said. "And strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded and, at the same time, protecting nature."

One reason the pope's 2015 encyclical has resonated far beyond the Catholic Church, she added, is "because everybody needs somebody trustworthy to point a way forward in complex realities — to say, 'Here, come, look, let's try this together. Don't lose hope. It's worth a shot.'"

Here's what we've heard from readers recently:

Last week's EarthBeat Weekly story about the world's addiction to plastic struck a chord with some readers.

Pat Heffron-Cartwright wrote:

> St. Leonard Faith Community in Centerville, Ohio, has its creation care team put monthly challenges into the bulletin. The challenge for December is to ONLY use reusable bags when we go into any store. We hope this will get people into the habit of always taking their own bags to the stores.

Jesuit Fr. Peter Henriot added:

> Thank you for the really helpful — and challenging — reports on EarthBeat! Especially good report on plastics. Here at Bellarmine Prep, Tacoma, [Washington], we have a really good "Sustainability Committee" of students and faculty members, with strong educational and action components. I'll be sure to share with the committee your newsletter connection, especially the current one on plastics. We have banned plastic bottles from the campus.

It was the story about "ornitheologists" that resonated with Nancy Shaffer of Niles, Michigan, who describes herself as a "hopeful and thankful great-grandmother." She wrote:

> If I didn't believe in God, who would I thank for the bluebirds?

Here's what else is new on EarthBeat:

- NCR publisher Bill Mitchell writes that on a long Thanksgiving road trip, he learned some lessons about driving an electric vehicle that he hadn't learned on shorter hops around town — and he rediscovered the joy of slowing down to enjoy the ride.
- Doreen Ajiambo at Global Sisters Report describes the work of Carmelite Missionary Sr. Patricia Chimimba, who has organized women near the capital of Malawi to save the last remaining forest in the area.
- And in South Sudan, the bishop in one of the country's largest dioceses appealed for aid as flooding left roads, homes, farms and markets under three feet of water, reports Frederick Nzwili for Catholic News Service.
- In this week's "Simple Advent Revisited" reflections, Brenna Davis of the Ignatian Solidarity Network invites us to reflect, perhaps in the quiet of candlelight, on where our treasure really lies.

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Here's some of what's new in other climate news:

- A coalition of electricity companies has pledged to install a network of fast-charging stations for electric vehicles across the United States by the end of 2023, reports Joseph Winters at Grist. Also at Grist, Shannon Osaka takes a look at the logistics of distributing the half-million charging stations President Joe Biden has promised as part of the $2 trillion infrastructure bill currently before Congress.
- Meanwhile, Matthew Daly at the Associated Press reports that an executive order signed by Biden aims to make the U.S. federal government carbon neutral by 2050 — an effort officials hope will have a ripple effect through the energy and technology industries.
- Spurred by the pandemic boom in online purchasing, Amazon opened 300 new distribution facilities in the U.S. in 2020 — nearly as many as in the previous four years combined, and disproportionately affecting communities of color

with higher traffic and pollution, writes Kaveh Waddell for Consumer Reports.

- In Illinois, organic farmer Henry Brockman has meticulously documented the changing climate and its impact on his land, along with his efforts to adapt so he can leave his farm and a legacy for his children. Lori Rotenberk tells his story beautifully at Civil Eats.

- Despite the grim headlines that seem to be everywhere, Kieran Mulvaney at National Geographic found five trends this year that offer hope for the environment.

Closing beat:

This is my last issue of EarthBeat Weekly. Next week, I'll be leaving NCR to concentrate on reporting on environmental issues in Latin America. It's been a privilege for me to be part of EarthBeat for the past year and a half and to share the journey with you.

Brian Roewe will continue to write about how people of faith are responding to the climate crisis, and he'll be joined in the New Year by a new EarthBeat editor.

To all of you who are working, in large and small ways, to right environmental injustices and live more gently on the planet, thank you for all you do. I wish you a blessed Advent season and a joyful Christmas. And as always, thank you for reading EarthBeat.

This story appears in the **EarthBeat Weekly** feature series. View the full series.