



COURTESY: TASHKA YAWANAWÁ

COURTESY: LYNETTE WALLWORT

The Sanctuary Interview

Meet Tashka and Laura Yawanawá

In 1998, Tashka Yawanawá, from the Brazilian Amazon, left Brazil to study English in California, U.S.A. There, he met Laura Soriano, a Mixteca-Zapoteca activist from Oaxaca, Mexico, who, like him, is a dynamic bridge-walker between two worlds. Laura speaks four languages and has a degree in International Relations. **Vance Martin** shares an insightful discussion with Tashka and his wife Laura, who have worked for the rights of indigenous peoples from all over Latin America for many years.

Tashka and Laura, you are two of the most dedicated, experienced, and hardworking people in the world for culture, nature, and people. Your message and work support not only your own community, the Yawanawá people, but also indigenous peoples, communities, and all life around the world. Please tell us how your work began and how it has grown.

In 1999, we founded the Nawa Institute, an organisation to serve indigenous communities. We began to travel the world, never sure of where the financial support would come from, but knowing we needed to connect with indigenous peoples to speak and listen together, assess common needs, and offer solutions to their problems.

In 2002, Tashka became Chief of the Yawanawá and assumed responsibility for 600 people – all that was left of his people and culture – and

165,000 hectares (400,000 acres) of Amazon rainforest in Brazil, all that was left of their traditional homeland. In just a few years, we managed to double the extent of Yawanawá territory, begin the reinvigoration of the Yawanawá culture, and establish economically and socially empowering relationships with the outside world. The Yawanawá population is now over 1,200 people.

This is so inspiring. How did you do it?

We are grateful that we could help lead the remote Yawanawá people in the Brazilian Amazon back from near obliteration through a long and essential process of sustaining the Yawanawá wisdom, plant knowledge, cosmology and language. We know that this is an immeasurable contribution to the legacy of mankind. Thankfully, it accelerated quickly! We were able to work within, and then beyond, the Yawanawá people to restore the vital dignity and sense

of identity of indigenous communities in Brazil through a series of cultural revitalisation efforts and innovative business partnerships, proving that maintaining cultural integrity need not conflict with economic prosperity.

We developed a unique, two-step methodology to facilitate both the economic and the cultural revitalisation of today's indigenous communities. First, we organised an annual festival that brought together a host of activities and interventions designed to celebrate the traditions, history and values of the community. Our goal was, and remains, to change the community's definition of wealth (from one of just finances to one that values culture as much as finance), and thereby help the community and others see the Yawanawá's inherent cultural prosperity instead of the stereotype of indigenous poverty and misery. Then, secondly, equipped with

a renewed sense of self-worth and a clear understanding of their assets, the community members could identify ways to use their cultural resources to fuel business deals on their own terms.

In the middle of all of this, we were also blessed with two daughters, Kenemani and Luna Rosa. Our family divides its time living and working in the Yawanawá community – requiring two full days of travel up the remote Gregorió river to Tarauacá (State of Acre) – and also in the town of Rio Branco, where we live and work to represent indigenous peoples and our solutions for the world.

The Yawanawá Life Plan is impressive; it is a model blueprint for how indigenous communities everywhere can think and act to strengthen their culture, their message, and to protect Mother Earth.

The Yawanawá Life Plan is like a tree: it has many branches. It is a strategic plan that we developed over a five-year period for the whole community, and its children, men, women and elders. Its aim is to secure our territory, health, education, culture, language, economy, and identity, so we can continue being Yawanawá in our preserved land for the next generations.

What is the most important role that indigenous people can play in the world right now, at this greatly troubled time?

We are living through an environmental crisis, and as we see it, the world has two options. One is to continue supporting the ecocide of Earth's lands and waters and the genocide of indigenous peoples – which leads directly to humanity's self-destruction – and the other is to show that there is a positive aspect to this environmental crisis. By listening to and making alliances with indigenous people, all humankind can benefit from maintaining our living forests and ways of life.

Laura, you and your people are from Mexico. What was your life before meeting Tashka?

Before I met Tashka, I was already an indigenous activist, working for indigenous people's rights. I felt that was always my mission in life. That mission brought us together in 1999 when we were in San Francisco, California, where at that time I was the Executive Director of an indigenous organisation called the South/Meso American Indian Rights Center.



ABOVE Tashka, the Chief of the Yawanawá in his resplendent traditional attire, and his wife Laura, were single handedly responsible for reviving their tribe by developing a sustainable life model that merges cultural integrity with economic prosperity.

FACING PAGE Tashka Yawanawá at the Global Climate Strike in New York, in September 2019.

I am very pleased to tell you that at WILD11 at Jaipur in March 2020, the Yawanawá Community's work to protect its rainforest will be recognised globally as one of just two projects that will benefit from the carbon offset programme of WILD11 and the travel done by delegates. How do you protect your rainforest from illegal logging, and incursions by ranchers and miners?

The Yawanawá territory is almost 200,000 hectares. It borders with the Libertade Extractive Reserve, on the left side of the Gregorió river, and borders with the Indigenous Land Carapana and

Kampa do Carapana on the right side. The only unprotected side is at the lower end, bordering Ratinho's private lands, where illegal logging and illegal fishing are common and is in constant conflict with encroachers. Our people protect these many hectares of original forest. Only two per cent of our land is converted for agriculture and other uses.

If invaders are encountered during a patrol, we first request them to leave the area, since it is indigenous territory. Each encounter is recorded with a report, photos, date, and contact information of the intruders. We do not confront them



TOP & ABOVE The annual traditional Mariri festival is a week-long celebration designed to honour the traditions, history and values of the community.

RIGHT Through this annual festival, the community is instilled with a renewed sense of self-worth and a clear understanding that their culture, territory, health, language, economy, and identity are invaluable.



Culturally rooted yet globally connected, Tashka is the youngest chief in the history of the Yawanawá, heading 1,200 people.

in a violent manner. The illegal invasion is reported to the relevant organisations including Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI), which translates to National Indian Foundation, the police, and the governor's office.

The story of your relationship with Aveda, the major natural cosmetic company, is inspiring and historic. Am I right that you negotiated one of the first commercial/cultural relationships to avoid bio-piracy and create a strong, mutually beneficial relationship between the Yawanawá and Aveda?

Yes, a 27-year-long relationship has been built between Yawanawá and Aveda. This has been a learning experience for both. The partnership works well because Aveda as a company respects the Yawanawá self-determination and has been sensitive and flexible with our cultural ways. We have developed a direct communication with them.

Many people are afraid today... of climate change, extinction, and the loss of nature. What do we need to do to create a wilder world that is better for all people, all life, and to rid the world of fear and hopelessness?

We need to be more caring toward each other and nature. The same way we care for our family, father, mother, child, brother, sister, partner, friend, neighbour, we need to care for nature, plants, animals, insects; all that is close to us in our own home. This is a time to be more human with each other and with nature.

COURTESY: SERGIO VALE

We are one global family. We need to stop seeing ourselves as separate beings.

We are so pleased that you can visit India for the first time, for WILD11, at Jaipur in March 2020. What message will you bring to this Congress?

In the 21st century, all peoples of the world have to unite to fight for the same cause, the survival of the human species. An essential aspect of this is to share our planet with the nature that supports us all. We need to respect nature and allow her the space and freedom to be herself, and only in that process can she support us and all life. This, embodied in the 'Nature Needs Half' movement, can be

an important call for reciprocity between humans and nature – and it can also be called respectful common sense!

We live in a global village, where we are interconnected with each other, so it is necessary and entirely possible to collectively take action, now, today. We do not have much time to repair our planet. It is a great responsibility that each of us have to step up and act. For us indigenous peoples of the Amazon, we have been the guardians of this magnificent rainforest that is a common good of humanity, and therefore must be preserved for all of us who live on this planet. 🙌

Tashka Yawanawá is Chief of the Yawanawá people in Acre, Brazil. The son of the former leader of the Yawanawá, Tashka grew up witnessing the virtual enslavement of his people by the rubber industry and experiencing the near annihilation of the tribe's culture by missionaries. Since the 1980s, Tashka has actively fought for the rights of indigenous peoples. Realising that he needed further education to improve the situation of the Yawanawá, he pursued higher education in the U.S. and abroad. He was directly involved in the creation of the Indigenous Lawyers Association and co-founded the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Youth Alliance, through which he shares the experiences and knowledge of the Yawanawá with youth around the world, and works with projects that guarantee the preservation of different indigenous cultures. In 2001, Tashka returned to Brazil, and chose to use the knowledge gained from his experiences abroad to help his people transform their future. He became the youngest Chief in the history of the Yawanawá at age 25. In a short amount of time, Tashka and Laura have managed to double the extent of Yawanawá territory, reinvigorate Yawanawá culture, and establish economically and socially empowering relationships with the outside world. Tashka and Laura have two daughters – Kenemani and Luna Rosa – and divide their time living and working in the Yawanawá community and Rio Branco, Brazil.

Laura Yawanawá is a Zapotec and Mixtec Indian from Oaxaca, Mexico. She holds a degree in international relations, focused on indigenous people and political affairs. Laura speaks three languages fluently (English, Spanish and Portuguese). Previously, she served as the Executive Director of the South and Meso-American Indian Rights Center in Oakland, California. She has worked for the rights of indigenous peoples from all over Latin America for many years. Together with her husband Tashka, she travelled with a backpack all over Latin America, visiting remote indigenous communities to empower them with information to fight for their rights and self-determination. She co-founded organisations to support indigenous peoples, such as the Nawa Institute, and INIYA (Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Alliance). She also worked for the Climate Change Institute of the State of Acre, organising workshops in indigenous communities about climate change and environmental services. She comes from a matriarchal culture in the northern hemisphere. Seventeen years ago, she married Tashka Yawanawá. Since then, they have worked together for the good of the Yawanawá people. She now serves as President-Director of the Yawanawá Sociocultural Association/ASCY. She has been instrumental in helping transform a community from a deeply male-oriented culture to one that is more open and inclusive of women.