

Deep Adaptation Q&A with Extinction Rebellion founding member Skeena Rathor hosted by Jem Bendell

Jem Bendell: Welcome to another Deep Adaptation Q&A with me Jem Bendell. Our guest this month is Skeena Rathor. Skeena and I met a couple of years ago. She is a founding member of the climate and ecological campaign organization, Extinction Rebellion, within which she's a founder of their guardianship and visioning circle. She has played a key role at the heart of Extinction Rebellion since it started, and even before through her personal connections and work previously with the people involved in Rising Up. Skeena thank you very much for joining a Deep Adaptation Q&A.

Skeena Rathor: Thank you for inviting me again.

Jem Bendell: What would be really good, just for people who don't know too much about Extinction Rebellion, believe it or not there might be some, what really motivates people to not just participate loosely but actually participate fully full time at the heart of things like you've done now for two years? What motivates you? Could you say something about how you got involved in Extinction Rebellion? What motivated you? What were the key moments, perhaps?

Skeena Rathor: Yes, I can say lots. I'll try not to say too much. By the way, you said that we were a campaign, but we're a movement. I would like to emphasize that. A movement in the greater scheme of things. We're moving into and with something quite spectacular I think. And how did I come about? Well, I think you know what happened Jem, but we want to share it. So my life was dedicated to social justice issues, as well as my professional work as a body-mind-heart teacher. I arrived at your doorstep in Cumbria with an idea about rewriting a leadership syllabus for the Labour Party, for women in leadership in the Labour Party. And the title of your three day event was The Poetics of Leadership. So there I was ready to learn more about the poetics of stories of leadership. You dropped a bomb, right? Well, that's how it felt for me. And instead, what happened for me was this huge emotional, physical experience and intellectual experience as well, in understanding where the climate science was in its reality. And what that meant for my work as a campaigner. I was involved with Rising Up and Compassionate Stroud, the grandmother ship, as a rebel maybe or as an activist. And it changed everything. I described it to people as being like the day after I woke up after having my first child. You wake up that first morning as a new mother, and you know that nothing is ever going to be the same again. That you're in a completely new dawn. And that's how it felt listening to what you shared. My friends Simon Bramwell and Gail Bradbrook I knew were right at the edge of this. And I knew I had been avoiding conversation with them because I'd literally been cancelling meeting them. Then I came straight home to Stroud, and there I was in Gail's living room, saying what do we do? And she said, well we know what to do! And we went forward from there.

Jem Bendell: So if you take yourself back two years, what were the emotions that you felt when you were sitting there with Gail?

Skeena Rathor: Shock horror. I actually felt my belief systems starting to crumble and collapse. Despair. The despair didn't last weeks at that point. I fall into it now sometimes again. It's waves of despair. But it was shock. I was in deep shock. I was shaking for days. And as a trauma therapist, I knew what that meant. I knew what to do with it. I sat with it and transformed it. And I'm still transforming it. We all are. I know we are.

Jem Bendell: So you had the benefit of knowing people who are close to you, who have a history in environmental activism and political activism?

Skeena Rathor: Yes. I'm in such a privileged place. There are people in Stroud. The green movement in Stroud is so huge, enormous and very strong. I had been involved in Transition Towns. I was a Green Party member before I became a Labour Party member. And so it was very easy for me to access empathy for what I was experiencing and what I was learning. And so a huge place of privilege.

Jem Bendell: Did Gail and Simon try and calm you down with stories of how we can fix this? What was the response?

Skeena Rathor: Most certainly not. And most certainly not Gail. Gail was overjoyed, maybe that's the wrong word.

Jem Bendell: At your shock?

Skeena Rathor: In one sense she was. Because she felt that people weren't listening. And partly that Stroud had shut down to some of what she and Simon were saying. She had been praying for connection, bridging, all of those things. And she felt that something had shifted with me turning up at her door. This is how she described it.

Jem Bendell: Yeah, wow. So from all that experience, you bring that into your own personal experience, that emotional journey? How have you taken that experience forward, both your own emotional journey and how you process it, but also how you were held in that by Gail and Simon and others? How have you taken that into what you do in Extinction Rebellion? Because there must have been so many times of really painful conversations within the movement?

Skeena Rathor: Really great question. I feel it's a great question because actually it is about taking ourselves into truth, and our pain, and our grief, and our sense of shock and despair, and challenge, and also what we dream of. I feel like that's where this time is. It's calling us to be our most authentic reality, and share that with each other. I think what I did and leaned into was at first creating ceremony and space for reflection, space for connecting with a more whole body, a more vast intelligence maybe. I hear myself saying that and implied in it is something bigger, or more important, or expanded, or better. That isn't what I mean. What I mean is how, where we are there is a dehumanizing aspect to what we bring in terms of our whole intelligence that has contributed, or actually for me, is a root cause

of why we are in breakdown. Why we are in multiple crises and multiple collapse scenarios all over the world. And so my focus, my passion, has been about creating space for new discovery, vision, articulation, of the story of who we are, and the story of becoming, that we are longing for. That's been my way of reckoning with the grueling and horrific reality for our children, and the children of all species. The loss, the grief, the trauma.

Jem Bendell: Nevertheless, with this outlook you have worked full time in a movement, which is about seeking to get societies to reduce carbon emissions. Could you say why that's important and also how you find a way of working on the other aspects of your truth, which is the kind of breakdowns that you anticipate or that you're seeing around you.

Skeena Rathor: I think you said something about us being part of a movement that is asking or talking about solutions and drawing down carbon. I don't see that so much, if I'm honest. I see Extinction Rebellion saying to people that there is this most enormous of emergencies, there's an existential threat to life on Earth, including our own. And there are things that need to be done urgently. But we think that the solutions, the fix it nature of our paradigm, is best left to a citizen's assembly. And left to making more democracy. Left to re-inventing a pillar of society around democracy. I don't think we've spoken so much about what that looks like. I think we're operating, and I'm personally operating, in much trust around people, as a part of a movement of movements, discovering what's needed and what's necessary together. I also think that that takes us down a well worn and threadbare track. Because I want much more from this, and I believe we need much more than solutions that draw down carbon. Carbon sequestration, or technological solutions, or mitigation possibilities. I think there's something here around what I call our 'heartset' instead of a mindset that needs to transform itself. We know when people are given an end of life diagnosis, or have a near death experience, and suddenly their whole sense of what it is to be alive is different. I think that's what we're in. I think we're moving from the exoteric, and this is an initiation into the esoteric. Nothing for me, nothing less, is going to do. And it's not in a policy, or a particular style of politicking, or an economic restart. It's in shifting something much deeper in the human psyche.

Jem Bendell: Is that is that then why you are very interested in what's called decolonization? Does that connect then?

Skeena Rathor: Absolutely. I think the Enlightenment project, the colonial project, the project that the patriarchy over 5000 years ago birthed into being, or what I call an obsessive patriarchy, is where the conversation really needs to go or the inquiry really needs to go. Otherwise, I think we're tweaking and fixing around systems and a culture that will take us to its death regardless.

Jem Bendell: And has that been clear in Extinction Rebellion, until now? The depths of the critique that we are in this predicament because of these 1000 years of the dominant culture of patriarchy?

Skeena Rathor: I think we're really scared of talking about it. I know I have been. I know, in the face of our theory of change, our dominant theory of change, because actually we have an ecology of theories of change. I know in the face of the theory of change and the literature and the research that we have extrapolated and shared with the world, that what I'm saying doesn't really speak to that, and in some

ways challenges that. I know there hasn't been much space for looking beyond the strategy that we've employed and scientific research. We've been looking for a formula. Gale and Roger talk about codes for social change. For me personally, it sits in the paradigm that we know to say that we think we know what social change is going to involve. It's this set of numbers and these sets of figures. And this tactic, and this strategy. It's very difficult, but I'm ready not to be scared. I feel I'm personally in a place of self-annihilation in terms of my old being, and I'm in a pretty fearless state right now. And I want to talk about this much more.

Jem Bendell: A lot of people when they hear that environmentalism relates to decolonization and anti-oppression or patriarchy, it can sound like a lot of big words to some people. Could you say very clearly? How does anti-patriarchy, anti-racism relate to the climate crisis and activism?

Skeena Rathor: I think the issue Jem is that it's not it's not anti-. It's not about being in an anti-stance, or even rebellion. I understand that what puts people off is that it's still a reactive space. You're in your resistance and in your no to something, which is really important, but it's only half of the story. I think we are getting stuck again and again in the de- bit. The unseating and the unlearning. The disentangling, the deconstruction, that is decolonization or *anti*-racism or *anti*-oppression work. And what I'm really excited and inspired by is that we move into speaking about what we want and describing and articulating in words, in our body, in our expressions of how we show up as humans, the dream and the possibility that is the Yes. That is what I call co-liberation work, right now within Extinction Rebellion. That's what we're calling it. There is that place of unlearning, but it's describing what the new learning might look like. Where do we begin to step into our powerfulness, and a freedom from our oppression, our traumatized ways of operating, behaving, speaking, strategy creating, our plans that we do. How do we step into something that speaks to the most free, most beautiful, most true place in us and describes that?

Jem Bendell: What will co-liberation look like as a project or activity or message within Extinction Rebellion?

Skeena Rathor: The essence of the co-liberation is the understanding that liberation can't be done individually, and that individual solutions, like me going on a decolonizing training that individualizes the issue, are so limited. The co-liberation understands that your safety depends on mine and mine on yours, as does my flourishing. That liberation is never only one way or one group. It can't be done like that. What the project is trying to grow and co-create are systemic agreements and systemic commitments and systemic inquiry into liberation. So we would do the thing that's made 'self', the self-development, the self-care, the self, you know, all this. The attribution that we give to the self in the project that is humanity is shifted into a state of co-mutuality and a co-existence and interconnectedness. I can give you examples. So, one example that we're trying to birth into within Extinction Rebellion is to say, in every team, we would have a co-liberation tracker that sits alongside the facilitator and is tracking the power dynamics in that group, where powerlessness and power meet in any group setting. Where our trauma and our oppression plays out in power over and in power under behaviors. And how is it that when we know we all want to expand our power as a group and as individuals, how do we sit within that together? How do we become true to that?

Jem Bendell: I like the emphasis on liberation because environmentalism the previous decades in the West hasn't really talked like that. The first question is from Matt Osmond.

Matt Osmond: Hi, Skeena. Firstly, thanks. It's a delight to meet you here. I think I first most powerfully connected with XR when I met you at St. Ethelbert some time ago. And it was an event there called sacred rebellion. But what you really introduced us to was Deep Adaptation. And that was a real eye opener for me. I'd already read Deep Adaptation and it had affected me. But how close it was to the birth of the movement. And ever since then, I felt like there's been this question. If it's okay, I want to ask it in my way and then tell you how I heard it from someone else in this forum that really helped me. The question for me that was really encapsulated in what you presented that day, was this dilemma about a movement that maybe with a kind of unintended momentum keeps returning to an or/else language. We've got 12 years left to save the world, or else. And it's that same old or/else language, and it's like it's running more and more brittle. And I wonder how many people I know who really think, who really do sincerely believe, and bless them if they do, that we're going to turn the taps off and stop climate change. You know that that is going to happen in time.

Skeena Rathor: This is such a personal question. I'm really nervous in answering it because I'm concerned for Jem's feelings in my response, and other people's feelings. I think the issue is that we herald scientific truth, as the priority truth, as the truth that has supremacy about it. That's how I entered this field. So I get very confused about this because I was able to access this reality because I heard Jem present some science. But I think there is the challenge. Because if we do this because of a scientism, which I think is where we've got stuck in humanity. If we do this because Jem and others have said, look at the climate science, I don't think we'll do much that could enable humanity to become the most beautiful force, the most regenerative presence in the community of life, that it can be. I'm saying I kind of agree with you that it can't be about saving, and it can't be about mitigation, or an or/else because we're terrified that we're going to die, and our children are going to die. It has to come from somewhere else. I have huge trust in human hearts and the morality and the love that emanates from human heartedness. So my wish would be to lift other truths up to stand with the truth of the science and actually to give them more voice, more space, and a chance to reckon with the paradigm that is. And yet again I can bring this back to the Enlightenment project and the colonial project, and everything that's emanated from there has been in this in the mirror image of what's taken humanity off track and has taken us into control and fixed behaviors and behaviors where we think we know what science is, that we know, because science is saying so. But what about what we know from all the other ways that we know as human beings? What about a much deeper knowing? What about the truth that is the immorality that there's more food waste than then there are hungry people in this world? What about the fact that in the so-called most civilized nation in the world, the USA, is where children can get shot in their school classrooms? What about the fact that depression is about to become the number one illness in the world, according to the World Health Organization by 2040? These are truths. But they're not located in a definite science. They are something that shows the dehumanizing, the de-spiritualizing of who we are in those truths. That's, I think, what we need to talk about, and I think we need to talk much less about climate science, much less. And that's what I would be appealing to everybody for.

Jem Bendell: Really clear. Thank you, Skeena. Louis, you have a question on this too?

Louis: Hi Skeena, I think you've basically done a lot of answering to my question, which is, to link back to what you said about obsessive patriarchy, the Enlightenment project. Capitalism, racism, colonialism, for me, my understanding is new, but that they are part of the same thing. I think my question is about how much is XR too narrow? I mean, I think you're saying XR needs to get much bigger.

Skeena Rathor: Well, we are, yeah. Yeah. I think like everything, and Jem, Gail and Roger know this, there is a credibility, there's a way to access mass consciousness. And, sadly, perhaps one of the most available ways is through science. Although I think I'm ready to say, that's actually why we haven't cut through. Because you're still accessing, you're still using the mind to make meaning. And it's not working. I don't see the kind of waking up that we talked about, the four R's of relinquishment, restoration and all of those things that we know are part of the challenge. I don't see people really able to hear them. And so because I think we are talking to the frontal lobes, we're talking to people's frontal lobes. And that's hugely limited, right? And we know this. I know Jem you know all this. And so for us, the question is, what you're saying is how do we make meaning that matters to people's hearts, where they can find a relatedness to the reality that we are living in through the Deep Adaptation forum.

Jem Bendell: Graham.

Graham: Hello. Skeena, I recently read a paper from a right wing think tank in America. And let me assure everybody that is not my usual reading material. But sometimes it's interesting to see what other people with different views are thinking. And this was postulating that the right wing parties, particularly the Republicans post-Trump could co-opt the climate agenda. They could suddenly wake up, recognize that there's very little time left to do anything, and very aggressively pursue the climate agenda. Not bothering to be awake, not bothering about ideas like truth, or justice or anything like that. And maybe that'll get things to happen quickly. We already know the Chinese government and other dictatorial governments can make things happen quickly. My question for you is would you welcome such a move if it got action? Or do we have to wait until everybody is awake? All these problems you've spoken about that have been there since forever and not got solved. Do we have to wait till all those are solved, and then the changes are introduced by the correct people?

Skeena Rathor: And I just want to make sure I understand your question. Are you asking me if it doesn't matter who makes the change?

Graham: I'm asking you if people make the change for the wrong reasons. And from a perspective that you and I might not agree with. Should we welcome that because it makes it happen and makes it happen more quickly? Even if a lot of rights and justice and truths are trampled in the process? Because we have so little time. Or do we have to wait until the correct people, the people we agree with maybe are in power and they can bring about change?

Skeena Rathor: Okay. So I think I'm hearing a binary here. Right people/wrong people. I don't really know how to be with binaries right now. I don't feel like I can answer this question eloquently. But I'm going to have a tiny go at trying. For me, it's about us having communication with all people. And it's about how we would reach out to all political ideologies and all communities. How do we build deep

collaboration, and this has been at the heart of the visioning teams, a quest to build what we've termed deep collaboration, as the vision for systems change and transformation of all the different kinds that we're seeking. And what we realized, what I realized, after a year and a half of cycling constantly around this vision, and this dreaming about collaboration, is that it feels pretty much impossible, when we are so separated in right and wrong, left and right. And good and bad. That the divisions that exist right now, the separation story, that that is. That's what we need to bring our attention to and our compassion and also our truth and our fierce demand for that separation story to come to its end, to come to its rightful end. I think we need to go much deeper than who do we work with, and how do we work with them. For me, it's how do we liberate ourselves enough for it to cascade and heal and reconcile and repair the relationships between the tribes that are humanity, in whichever way we've separated into tribes.

Jem Bendell: Let's hear a question from Julian in Stroud.

Skeena Rathor: Hi Julian. So nice to see you!

Julian: Hi Skeena, great to see you too. Thank you for all of this. Really great stuff. I think you hit it in one with your point about the need to change our heartset. That clearly is where this has to come from. I've been banging on about climate and sustainable development for much of my life. I'm an environmental engineer. I suppose my big turning point was when the water industry was privatized. I went into environmental engineering as an in-service profession. Well, not a hope in Hell. It's almost impossible to work honestly in that sector. I would say rapidly going through this point because it's a huge and complex issue. But the damage that Margaret Thatcher did to our society through saying greed is good is profound and huge. The question to come to it, is really exposing the complete antithesis of that point, and you are good enough to come out a few months before lockdown to come and look at the concrete fields around Stroud. Concrete, we've lost all the humus in our fields. And as a water engineer, I assure you, we can account for the vast bulk of all the climate change effects simply through farming practice. In the Stroud area in summer months, and that ranges from temperature, through to intensification of rainfall, through the flood runoff. But my point is that there are many good climate exemplars within the sacred, regenerative and true vegan farming movements, where they all universally sequester carbon as soil humus, the complete opposite of what you saw around Stroud. And these all broadly work within these principles that the UN are increasingly pushing. The tree eater Khurana principles that come out of Bali, where historically Bali has a sacred agricultural system that again, sequesters carbon. Talking about carts and horses, basically, the ethos has to come first. That's where we need to start. And so you're totally correct. It's as much a statement as a question. We need to apply the ethos before we can change this world with all its horrors back into a beautiful, safe world for us all to live in.

Skeena Rathor: I'll take that as a statement.

Jem Bendell: What do you say to people that say this sounds too much like middle class people getting too self-involved when there's horrendous suffering right now, because of the climate and ecological disaster? And that this is turning inward when actually, we should be mobilizing to try and do something about international suffering?

Skeena Rathor: What would I say to those people? I'd firstly say, tell me more about that suffering. Because I don't think I've heard enough. I don't think I could possibly hear enough. I don't think we've heard enough. I think that this is actually part of our psychosis and our narcissism. And I agree there's so much navel-gazing and turning inwards. One of the things I think that has happened in terms of the consumption culture is the ability of the middle classes to switch off from the pain of others. And come into a therapizing about it, and be endlessly lost in the in the self-therapizing. I actually get very frustrated, and especially because that's been my work for 20 years, when people are in process with their body, mind, heart, and they are just circling. They are constantly circling. Re-traumatizing and circling. And actually avoiding the pain and the suffering that you've just pointed to Jem. Not to feel it. I want to say to the middle classes, feel, feel that pain. Walk into that fire. Walk into that fire that is showing itself to you. And become debilitated in it. Become horrified and despairing and aghast. Become helpless in the face of that pain. Become helpless. And until you do, until you are able to sit in the fire of it. There is just this, just what we're in, where people who have the privilege to avoid the suffering, constantly do avoid the suffering. And speak about it and circle with their peers around it. So I would say sorry to those people that you're speaking about. I am so sorry. And my heart aches every day. And sometimes I can't get out of bed because my heart is so sore. My chest is so heavy. And then sometimes I can. And I can activate something.

Jem Bendell: Thank you. Question from Wendy.

Wendy: Hi Skeena. In relation to what you were just saying about people talking about the suffering, and reading the news, and knowing that it's a thing. As someone who does a lot of work on the Facebook group, do you think there is a way of triggering people to have this realization that you had from Jem's conversation with you, that I had from seeing the icebergs melting and realizing that they weren't coming back in our lifetimes or our grandchildren's or great-grandchildren's? Do you or the XR movement have a feeling for what it is? And I mean, there's many things, and I think it's quite personal. But do you know the way to actually push a button on someone? Have you used it on friends or people who you can't get through to this, there's that blockage?

Skeena Rathor: Thank you, that's such an important question. I think there's lots I don't know about this. About how to press the button that resets something, essentially, in a human being. And I think what happened for me is that I got witnessed. I got witnessed by Rupert Read who was there, firstly. He literally held me. I also got witnessed by Jem, who was called out to speak to me. And then I got witnessed as soon as I returned home by close friends that I trusted, who could tell me I'm not going mad. And I'm not shaking for no reason. I'm having an appropriate response. The dysregulation that occurs from receiving shocking news needs human holding. It needs belonging somewhere. People are quite right to avoid it, it's too overwhelming, if that is not present in your life. I think human beings ultimately, we are here to survive, right? We are here to allow for thriving, and in our genius, if we are told shocking information, information that threatens the lives of the ones we love, if we don't have witnessing and holding and a community that can be with you in any questions that then need exploring and answering and activating, then you know that the best thing you can do is shut down. Of course it is. I think what I know is that somehow we have to build many more communities that have the capacity to witness and hold this story. And that's what I'm interested in XR doing and becoming. To spark and

grow communities that can hold trauma and the landscape of emotions that will surface when we when we are presented with threat.

Jem Bendell: Does that mean below the radar? Or do you engage mass media? Because for me, I chose not to engage mass media, because of what you've just talked about.

Skeena Rathor: For me there's no deliberate policy about engaging anyone, especially not mass media, as a deliberate policy. But the beautiful thing here is that there are human beings involved in mass media. And there are lots of people that we will naturally touch, who will touch others. And we can trust that we can reach mass media because we are in relationship with human beings.

Jem Bendell: What I mean is, is this message to go out through mass media to people who are unsupported? I didn't want to do that. So remember, after my speech with XR, Channel Four News came up and I said, no my message is worse than XR's. And I don't want that to just land in people's living rooms unsupported. I've focused more on those networks of people and helping create the capacities for people to hold each other for where more people wake up to this. And that's been the last two years rather than the big advocacy piece because of what you just talked about.

Skeena Rathor: I'm really grateful for all of that work that you have committed to in holding the subtleties here. And I completely agree, and I stopped talking to the media too. But I don't think there's an absolutism here, either. I think we can we can talk about this in a way that says, look we think the most important thing people can do right now is to build community resilience, psychologically and physically, and materially and all of the ways that community builds resilience. I think we can have this conversation in a different way. Like I say, I'm no longer with the idea that we lead with the science.

Jem Bendell: Okay, I'm looking forward to what this means for XR in the future. Both what you've just described, and what you've talked about with co-liberation. We've come to the end of the hour. Thank you, Skeena. And thank you, everyone. And thank you, Matthew.

Skeena Rathor: Thank you to Jem. Thank you for all you're doing.

Jem Bendell: Thank you Skeena. Bye everyone. See you next month.