

WEST OF MIDDLE EAST  
A podcast by Neda Nobari Foundation

Interview transcript

Atossa Soltani

TITLE: An Iranian-American Heart Lost in the Amazon

SUMMARY: An Iranian immigrant loses heart in the Amazon Rainforest when she realizes community goes beyond diaspora, community is global.

WEB: [Atossa Soltani](#) was born in Iran and lives in Los Angeles. But she spends most of her time in the Amazon rainforest, partnering with indigenous leaders to protect the world's largest, and most important, rainforest - the Amazon.

Atossa is founder of the internationally recognized organization called [Amazon Watch](#). The group is at the forefront of a big international human rights legal battle to [hold Chevron Corporation accountable](#) for spilling billions of gallons of toxic wastewater into Ecuador's rivers and streams. The case is unprecedented, it's the first time a U.S. company faces a judgment in a foreign court over environmental crimes. Atossa's group has also stopped governments' from taking natural resources from the Amazon.

"We've stopped dozens of really, really terrible projects," Atossa says. "We've helped indigenous people win legal title to millions and millions of acres of their rainforest homeland. In August of 2016 the government of Brazil cancelled the plans for the [Tapajos Dam](#). And that means that the last undammed major tributary of the Amazon is going to be a free flowing and not dammed."

Atossa says indigenous people are the stewards of the earth, so she's their megaphone. Together they protests. They use lawsuits and bullhorns. They do whatever it takes. Atossa says she learned about this spirit of civil disobedience in her high school in Tehran, Iran's capital. It was 1978, a few months before the Iranian Revolution.

"Growing up during the revolution in Iran, watching the revolution just erupt in the way that it did, it just gave me hope that people power in the right moment can make a difference," Atossa says. "So part of my sort of theory of change of how I've done this work was influenced by the revolution. Knowing that, you know, people have power when they organize."

TRACK: People were organizing against the country's king, the Shah. There were protests at Atossa's school every day. She was 13 years old.

"I was tear-gassed at least three times in the school yards," Atossa says. "You know, the older students, maybe the 17 or 18 year olds would start protesting. And the military

would literally park it's military vehicles at the entrance of the school doors and open the gates and tear gas the students in the school yard. And then the school would close down and the kids, sometimes we would be still in the stairwell or just trying to get out of our classrooms and we would be tear gassed while still in the school."

Atossa's parents sent her to the U.S. to live with her uncle. Away from the tear gas. But the thing is, if you're an activist in the West, sometimes there's tear gassed here too.

"I was tear-gassed in Seattle when we were at the protest against the World trade organization," Atossa says. "That felt like a war zone. We were there in the streets and were being tear-gassed both by ground cruise and helicopters. There 50 or 60 thousand people in the streets of Seattle shutting down the trade negotiations. Including labor unions and teachers and grandmothers and the raging grannies and the indigenous peoples. And we were tear gassed. In fact the U.S. army and national guard moved in and suspended the bill of rights."

Atossa and the indigenous people she works have been in the middle of a lot of tear gas throughout the years. But Atossa keeps fighting. Because she loves Amazon rainforest. It's the most biodiverse place on earth, home to 13 hundred different species of birds alone.

"One of my favorite times in the forest is when it's in the evening and the cacophony of the birds and the insects and the frogs all start to perform," Atossa says. "It's this huge orchestra."

An important orchestra. The Amazon produces tons of oxygen and absorbs carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases. It also cools the entire planet by one to two degrees celsius. To put things in perspective, if the earth's temperature did go up two degrees celsius, plant and animal habitats would be destroyed and replaced by deserts. We'd have a lot less food crops, and a lot more floods and droughts.

"The rain machine of the planet, which is the Amazon, does more for the planet by creating rain that rains on our cultural fields from Iowa to Argentina than it would chopped down and sold as trees or timber or mines," Atossa says "The function that the forest provides is literally the heart of the planet. So it's like saying if you're a human body, it's like saying you're brain decided it should mine your liver for some cash. You wouldn't live if you mined your liver."

But we are mining our liver. In the past 40 years, almost one fourth of the Amazon has been destroyed. Studies show at this rate, [the entire rainforest will be gone by the end of the century](#). Half of it will be gone by 2020.

"If there was to be a human war effort to restore our balance with nature, this would be the moment," Atossa says.

When Atossa first moved to the U.S., she had never heard of the Amazon Rainforest. And her classmates had never heard of Iran.

“When I first started school in Akron, Ohio high school, nobody really knew where Iran was,” Atossa says. “They were like, ‘Iran, where is that?’ And I’m like, ‘Have you heard of a Persian rug? Or a Persian cat?’ ‘Oh yeah, ok that’s where it. Ok, I understand.’ Within a few month, the Hostage Crisis, everybody knew about Iran. Iran wasn’t a good place to be from.”

The Iranian Hostage Crisis was when 66 Americans were held captive at the U.S. embassy in Iran in 1979. They were protesting America’s role in the 1953 coup d’erat, overthrowing Iran’s first democratically elected Prime Minister and replacing him with the Shah. Atossa had just moved the States a year earlier. She was the only immigrant in a small high school outside Cleveland, Ohio. Her dark skin, wavy black hair and thick Persian accent got her bullied her a lot.

They would throw notes in her locker that said, ‘Kill them damn Iranians.’ Or, ‘Take her hostage.’ On Atossa’s 16th birthday, some boys crashed her party. They beat up her friends and pushed her mother to the ground.

“The reality is that I was an immigrant during the Hostage Crisis, during a really unpopular time for Iran, Iranian people,” Atossa says. “My identity as an Iranian was not popular, it was dangerous. It was potentially harmful to me and my family. But rather than dwell on it and rather think this is terrible, this a block to my own personal flourishing and development and you know American people are bad because of it and people are wrong and bad, instead of getting into that I just looked for something bigger. Like what’s the bigger meaning here? And the bigger meaning is that we are one race. After all we are all race. There is really only one Homosapien. We are 99.999 percent genetically the same.”

The bullying stopped when Atossa went to college. She made friends, she studied. Then one day a guy on campus handed her a flier that changed her life forever. It was about Gaia: the idea that the earth is alive. Gaia theory says the earth part of one self-regulating organism, and us humans are a part of that organism.

“Earth is a living system,” Atossa says. “It’s intelligent. It’s interactive. As a whole it is a living, breathing planet. So to me that, almost a lightbulb went off. Like, ‘Wow. The earth is a living system. The earth is alive.’ And that was to me a big transitional moment where I was like, ‘Oh my goodness. So it doesn’t matter if you’re from Iran or Kuwait or France. You’re part of a living whole.’ And that to me became a much more interesting and truthful perspective to hold.”

That same year of college, her Freshman year of college, Atossa learned about the Amazon rainforest. That we need it to survive as a species. Decades later, it’s Atossa’s life’s mission to save the rainforest.

“It just made me realize that this is what is important in the world. My work on this planet is going to be about restoration. My work is going to be about protection of life and the well being of future generations. That’s going to actually be my career.”

Atossa Soltani says looking beyond homelands and diasporas led her to create a borderless community with tribal leaders in the Amazon Rainforest, from Ecuador to Brazil. Atossa says if she can make headway in the Amazon, where natural resources are so lucrative, then that's a beacon of light for everyone who wants to see change here in the West, whether that's in our forests, in our schools, or even in our White House.

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