

PHOTO ABOVE COURTESY OF SILAS BIRTWISTLE; BOTTOM AND LOWER RIGHT: JOHN EINARSEN



IT IS THE AFTERNOON of Friday, October 15 in Nagoya, Japan, three days before the official opening of the COP10 Biodiversity Summit, where 193 nations will hammer out the historic Nagoya Protocol (though that achievement is far

from certain just yet). Here under the conference centre's courtyard tent, TV cameras gather as Ahmed Djoghlaif arrives. A debonair Algerian in his late 50s, Djoghlaif is the Executive Secretary of the CBD, the Convention on Biological Diversity, under the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). He has come not to greet the delegates, however, but to visit COP10's new installation: a long wooden table with twelve chairs.

As onlookers draw near, it becomes clear that this table set is made almost entirely from driftwood. Each salvaged piece has a unique shape, texture, colour, and often other characteristics that suggest a story which could span years or decades — its beginnings as a magnificent tree, perhaps struck down or torn away by nature's force in a storm, or felled to satisfy humankind's need for shelter, or simply withered and keeled over with age. The currents of rivers and streams must have swept it along to the vast open sea. It continued there to decompose, further shaped perhaps by all manner of creatures for which



One Artist's Journey

a table with a global message



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it served as a habitat. Then one day, the driftwood washed back up onto the land.

‘A Table from the Sea’s Edge’ speaks not only of its own constituents’ journeys, but that of its London-based creator, Silas Birtwistle, and the coastal communities and organisations he encountered while gathering all of the driftwood.

“I did not go out intending to spread any particular message related to biodiversity and the environment as such,” Birtwistle explains. “It took shape as the work progressed.”

Birtwistle has worked with driftwood for over twenty years. One day in May 2009, he set out on a year-long expedition to the ‘four corners’ of the globe: British Columbia, Belize, Tanzania, and Malaysia, to be precise.

“It is a provincial piece, but also a global one. I came to realise that all the people I met had much the same concerns, espe-

cially in regard to how the environment around them is changing. Over-fishing, deforestation, rising sea levels...all these pose great challenges for coastal communities.”

Asked which of the locations made the greatest impression on him, Birtwistle describes a First Nations camp he settled into in northern British Columbia, out on a remote stretch of beach reached by logging roads, where the pungent scent of cedar penetrated the salty sea air. Abundant with wildlife and, most notably, laden with driftwood, this camp was where he cooked fresh wild salmon on log fires, watched mighty brown bears on the hunt and spotted the shiny black heads of orcas gliding through the waves. Some of the most beautiful landscapes he has ever seen, he says, were in northern British Columbia. “I thought I would be able to collect the wood I needed in no time at all, perhaps an hour or two, but having such a huge choice only



PHOTO BY SEAN SOUTHEY



PHOTO COURTESY OF SILAS BIRTWISTLE

made me picky — in the end it took two weeks!” he recalls.

Looking closely at one of the driftwood chairs, one notices a carving; this was made by renowned First Nations artist Arthur Vickers. Vickers has such affection for his art, recalls Birtwistle, that he claims the wood speaks to him. The trees, he says, communicate with each other, and know of the destruction happening around them.

In addition to driftwood, Birtwistle has made use of other materials. The straw-like seats of the chairs are made from woven recycled paper, and in sharp contrast to the organic nature of the rest of the work are brightly-coloured round table mats, bearing the names of all the sponsors and NGOs that contributed to the project that include the WWF and Maersk Line. These table mats were created by a Kenya-based company that creates other items — including jewellery — entirely from flip-flop sandals found washed up on Kenya’s beaches.

At every stage of its design the table has received encouraging feedback, and it is clear why the CBD, organizers of the Biodiversity Summit, saw its potential for inspiring delegates and other onlookers. “This isn’t an abstract work — the pieces maintain their classic proportions. It is a conference table, where people sit down and talk: in this case, about the future of our planet.” Indeed, the table has hosted meetings of the chief executives of several international organisations, Saudi Arabian royalty, Harrison Ford, who is Vice-Chair of Conservation International, as well as a group of youth from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Go4Biodiv initiative, whose participants collected messages from delegates on colourful origami cranes that were spread in the hundreds across the table.

Silas Birtwistle says his driftwood table set will soon be making a world tour: “Next year, 2011, is the Year of the Forests, and with the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) we want to continue spreading a positive environmental message.”

At the end of its tour, the table will be auctioned. The proceeds generated from its sale, Birtwistle hopes, will help fund some of the projects he had the opportunity to witness firsthand. One organisation, The Toledo Institute of Development and Environment (TIDE), based in Belize, works to protect forest and marine reserves from



PHOTO COURTESY OF SILAS BIRTWISTLE

illegal poaching and fishing. Many of the rangers were once in fact poachers themselves but had been persuaded that securing their land’s biodiversity would have a much more positive impact on their livelihoods. Birtwistle was taken in as a guest on a remote island, which, as he points out, is “about the size of this very tent” (less than half a soccer field). This tiny island acts as a vital outpost from which the rangers can easily monitor the reserves. With rising sea levels however, the islet is eroding away all the time.

“I would like to think that we could use the money to build reinforcements that could prevent this island from disappearing altogether.’ With a rueful smile, he adds, “But perhaps it is a little idealistic.”

The state of our planet today warrants further creative ideas to inspire us to protect all its wonders for future generations. Who’d have thought that a table could do just that? 🐦

- atablefromtheseaside.com/
- TIDE Belize: tidebelize.org
- WWF Coastal East Africa: worldwildlife.org/what/wherework/coastaleastfrica/
- WWF Malaysia and the Coral Triangle: worldwildlife.org/what/wherework/coraltriangle/



PHOTO COURTESY OF SILAS BIRTWISTLE

A video about Silas and his work is available at: <http://vimeo.com/16693317>