



All Rivers Run North
a conversation with Ian Boyd

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Ian Boyd is Director of Arc (www.artecology.space) on the Isle of Wight. Combining ecology and community with partners and agencies of all sizes, he has a distinctive understanding of natural history and making space for wildlife. Here, artist Rachel Johnston is in conversation with Ian, focussing on the relationship between art and environment.

Rachel Johnston What is the most important thing people can do to support the Isle of Wight's biosphere status?

Ian Boyd Take it in and digest first of all! Just take a moment to get a handle on what this means – that the Island is considered, by no less an authority than the United Nations, to be exceptional. The official script goes like this: *sites of excellence to foster harmonious integration of people and nature for sustainable development through participation, knowledge, well-being, cultural values and society's ability to cope with change.* In other words, the Isle of Wight excels in the opportunity it offers to bring people and the natural world together in a way that opens up positive expectations for the future, something we all need right now. Translating all of this into the everyday routines of a life on the Island is going to take time, and it will be different for different people, it will be both a personal mission and a collective one, and it will manifest in a thousand different ways, and that's all good, provided the premises, the clarity of the offer Biosphere makes, underpins the lot. That creed (and it is really something like a creed) is simply that a life on the Island is a life unusually bound up with the natural world, and a life on the island is intensely local. Where you live IS the Island, the 33 parishes, the 140 settlements, each has a different and distinctive way of talking about a life lived on the Isle of Wight. So, exploring your place, knowing how it works, encountering wildlife, wanting to encounter more wildlife, looking for ways to prod your place into better shape, talking to others about the same, sharing stories about what's good and what isn't, and knowing that there's always room for you to make a difference. And the great thing is, that in making a difference where you live, or work, you are acting as a global citizen, your actions are shared across the UNESCO Biosphere family, 700 amazing places in 130 countries. You are not alone! I guess you could summarise this by talking about a deeply entwined relationship between people, place and the natural world and a spirit of creativity that permeates all of it.

RJ How is the community important in looking after the island's environment/ecosystem?

IB It is fundamental. The thing to remember is that every community IS part of its local ecosystem. Even if we think we can cut ourselves away from such things we can't. We are biological entities, and medium-sized social mammals, we are wildlife, and that's just a fact. And so, the places we build to live and work are human habitats and they are entirely plumbed into the functioning of local ecological networks, the ecosystem of the locality. We can either enhance that ecological health through our actions, individually and together, or we can degrade and damage it. But if we do the latter then we simply diminish the quality of our own lives. Once we start to think about the way we live as an exercise in ecology, because that's exactly what it is whether we like it or not, then we begin to see that our individual health is a part of our community health which is part of our ecological health. And without sound community and public health, nothing works properly, socially, environmentally or economically.

RJ You use lots of art in your project - making and doing, how do you see the connections between creativity and the environment?

IB Creativity is all about expressing ideas, testing possibilities, exploring what might be. I think that this is precisely how ecosystems work – they express concepts of space and interaction, they test ways of working until they find the most useful, and they explore future possibilities through their succession and their stages of development, different in different places, running at different speeds, providing a multitude of possibilities that thin out to a dominant theme and trajectory. Being able to intervene in the ‘made’ ecosystems we share in urban environments is a creative activity, it’s just that most of the time we reduce it to lazy, indifferent and bland actions and decisions that generate minimum benefit and maximum loss. If we get better at creative application, through an experience of arts and making, then we might get better at building and sustaining habitats for humans too.



RJ Arc aims to get people to see things in 'new and interesting ways' - what would be an example of this?

IB A lot of what we do might be called ‘making the familiar unfamiliar, and the unfamiliar familiar’, and this is especially the case in the ‘place-based’ work, such as the Discovery Bay programme here in Sandown, including the Hullabaloo festival. We want to open up places that people know, because they live, work and visit there, to a new perspective, and that might be delving into its biodiversity, revealing just how rich and unexpected it is, in its corners, and verges, leftover bits of park and garden; or it might be encouraging a different response to it, through drawing, or making, using the materials and resources of the place to create a different connection to an everyday space. It’s a sort of mental and emotional refreshment! Rediscovering, unwrapping and mining our own territories, the places where we feel rooted, helps to protect what matters and to create new content, new material, new heritage, patina and authenticity, to keep the story going.

*Image: Clay, knotted linen, from All Rivers Run North
Photo credit Julian Winslow*

RJ What, in your view, allows people work together?

IB That’s a very big question! In my own experience it’s the sense of a shared endeavour that’s bigger than any of the participating/collaborating organizations, so there’s a sense of ‘cathedral building’ together if that makes sense! The most dispiriting ones are those where basically everyone has put in a bit of time but is looking to extract a bit more than that in funding back out again, and so the whole thing is really just expedient, the end result fades away once the project has done its job of keeping us all afloat. The first is rare, the second is everywhere!

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Rachel Johnston

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