



The Brahma Kumaris at
UN Biodiversity COP16 in Cali, Colombia
October 21 - November 1, 2024

Report 2: October 22 to 27

The first five full days of COP16 included a diverse wealth of activities from side-events hosted by the Green Team, to official meetings, to attendance at others' events, to encounters on bus trips and in lineups. Green Team members were able to learn, network and contribute to "making peace with nature" in both the Blue Zone (where official meetings take place and which is restricted to official delegates) and in the Green Zone - a beautiful vibrant collection of spaces right in the centre of the city of Cali open to the general public. The COP16 Green Zone is being called the Peoples' COP" and certainly it has that feel.

Tuesday and Wednesday October 22nd and 23rd

Following the pre-conference events and opening ceremonies, COP got fully underway and Green Team members took the opportunity to attend different sessions and exchange ideas with others committed to the theme of "making peace with nature". Here are **seven** of the events various team members attended:



1. Youth and Indigenous Peoples' Rights in the CBD. Anne-Christelle participated in this session with Youth and Indigenous Peoples' organizations, that are active in many projects aimed at restoring biodiversity in Colombia. The main issue raised by these groups, is to have their rights as Youth and Indigenous Peoples, acknowledged by the various levels of government. Their efforts to claim their rights help support and sustain the local Indigenous communities of Colombia. Anne-Christelle was able to share gratitude and good wishes for the young people doing this work.



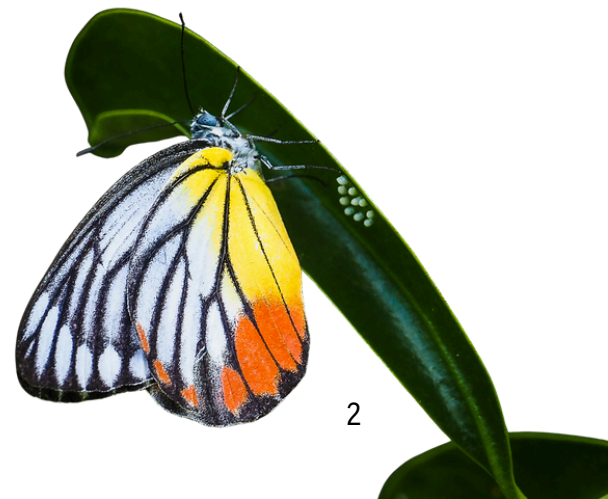
2. **Grief Care for Biodiversity Loss** was an intimate event beautifully facilitated by Blair Nelsen from Water Spirit Women at the Faith-based Organizations Pavilion. A small group attended and were able to take time to recognize and talk about the emotions they are feeling in the face of the loss of Biodiversity. Participants were then introduced to a number of tools to look at what kind of fulfilling actions could be done in order to contribute what is needed in a climate changed world. **Debbie and Valeriane attended and really appreciated the practical tools for reflection and contemplation that were shared and were able to contribute thoughts from their personal self-care practices.**



3. **Biodiversity Loss: Indigenous-led Solutions.** Indigenous leaders from Colombia, Ecuador, Cambodia and Kenya spoke at this event about the shifts needed in values, economics and eco-system relationships. David enjoyed hearing about their lessons learned that emphasized community participation and building on the capacities of women and men and their traditional knowledges. Each speaker was special in their own way, whether they talked about intergenerational values of respect and harmony, decolonizing minds and hearts, how we are all intertwined and need restoration training, mapping traditional conservation activities or women-led reforestation. Their project experiences were amplified by a Colombian elder sharing a manifesto that 115 Indigenous groups had prepared stating their five priorities for COP16. The priorities include engagement, direct grants, healing, care of life in its entirety for future generations - **and first and foremost, respect for Indigenous spirituality and lifeways. It was inspiring to be present at this event that set the aspirations very high for COP16.**

4. **XPRIZE Rainforest Initiative.** Debbie attended this session that focused on using knowledge and wisdom of biodiversity and innovative technologies to accelerate solutions to monitor species loss and incentivize integration of new technologies in monitoring. Presenters emphasized a key shift needed for reaching 2030 targets will be finding ways to value nature, putting it at the center of development initiatives.

Examples of new technologies, where drones and satellites are being used for rapid assessments and data gathering to measure biodiversity, still require people to operate them. Engaging local communities in this work requires **capacity building and transparency to build trust.** Awakening the consciousness of community members to see themselves as partners in these innovations will require empowerment, cooperation and respect for the experience of all stakeholders.





5. **An Asset and Benefit Sharing (ABS).** Initiative focused on building capacity in three African countries to enhance benefits from genetic resources, digital sequencing information, and traditional knowledge, aligning with Target 13. This multi-stakeholder project involved Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and value chains in accordance with the Nagoya Protocol (2006). Sponsors from Germany and the Netherlands conducted a self-assessment to gauge alignment with a whole government, whole society approach to ABS capacity building. While challenges were noted, one speaker emphasized a 'positive narrative,' that would highlight stories of cooperation, rights recognition, dignity and empowerment. The key lesson was a shift from 'seeing problems' to 'appreciating strengths' and focusing on using our energies to create powerful thoughts.

6. **Human rights-based Approach to Biodiversity Conservation.** This panel highlighted the importance of a human rights-based approach in transitioning from a framework agreement to actionable steps in biodiversity conservation. The threats posed by biological loss directly affect the rights of children and youth, and action must be taken to protect human rights defenders. Land use, tenure, and human rights, must be part of a comprehensive approach. The discussion emphasized the need to identify rights holders and also to incorporate cultural and spiritual well-being into all actions.

7. **CBD Initiative for Food and Nutrition - a catalyst for Kunming - Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF).** The panel highlighted the global issue of hunger, with 2.8 billion people currently affected, and emphasized the importance of biodiversity in agriculture for nutrient-dense food production. The need for alignment among agriculture, environment, and health sectors to create policies that promote nutritious food was recognized. The discussion addressed not only the agricultural aspect, but also the social stigma around local foods and the great need for the promotion of nutrient-rich traditional foods through education and market creation. **Many of the Brahma Kumaris own projects in regenerative agriculture in India are taking a similar approach.**



THE AWAKENING OF CONSCIOUSNESS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

This session, facilitated by Manuel was our first event in the Green Zone. It was conducted in Spanish and based on The Culture of Peace Initiative offered by the Brahma Kumaris Association of Colombia, using its slogan **“the art of living and relating in harmony with ourselves, with others and with nature”**.

The Culture of Peace Initiative is made up of **7 modules**: (1) The importance of learning to manage conflict, (2) The art of believing, creating and cooperating to build the future, (3) Benefits of a healthy, safe and collaborative work environment, (4) Meditation: a tool for experiencing inner peace, (5) The benefits of transforming tension into attention, (6) Positive thinking and attitude for creative performance, (7) Communication skills.

A group of 40 people participated enthusiastically in the event and discussed questions such as “What does the awakening of consciousness mean to you in the current context? **How do you think individual consciousness can contribute to sustainable development at a global level?** And What are the main challenges facing humanity, as a consequence of climate change?”. It was a lively exchange that was appreciated by all and each participant received an individual “making peace with nature” blessing at the end.



The Role of Faith Communities in Local Nature Recovery



The Great Casa Británica in Cali hosted a conversation about ‘The Role of Faith Communities in Local Nature Recovery’ presented by The Church of England, part of The Anglican Communion, a global community of 85 million members across 165 countries. The event brings a message of hope and urgent action to COP16, emphasizing the sacred responsibility to protect biodiversity as part of God’s creation. The Anglican delegation, led by Bishop Graham Usher, provided an excellent presentation on the different programs.

The Church of England and A Rocha UK are working together on **biodiversity conservation** by integrating faith, environmental stewardship, and community engagement. Their **key initiatives** include:

Churches Count on Nature: A citizen-science project encouraging churches to monitor biodiversity in their churchyards, which serve as valuable habitats for rare plants and wildlife.

Eco Church Program: This initiative provides tools for churches to adopt sustainable practices, such as land management, tree planting, and habitat creation, aligning environmental action with church activities.

Commitment to National Conservation Goals: The Church of England aims to support national targets such as restoring 30% of land and sea by 2030, emphasizing both climate action and biodiversity conservation.xa

Maureen, Maria-Paula, and Juan participated in the event to learn more about other faiths work on biodiversity. During the discussion that ensued, Maureen was able to share about the importance of restoring our relationship with nature and also of the power of prayer and meditation.





Meeting the CBD Secretariat Executive Director.

Faith leaders from the Faith for Biodiversity Coalition coordinated by Gopal Patel, had the opportunity to meet with **Astrid Schomaker**, Executive Secretary to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), in order to share the role of faiths in biodiversity conservation and their report showcasing various projects of biodiversity conservation by faith communities. Maureen and Juan represented the Brahma Kumaris. Maureen was invited to share some opening remarks together with Gopal Patel, Neddy Astudillo, Presbyterian Church; Daniel Perell, Baha'i Community; and Allen Ottaro, Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa.



Maureen expressed deep gratitude for the support of Astrid Schomaker and the secretariat. She emphasized the importance of restoring our relationship with the planet through love, respect, gratitude, and care, placing nature at the heart of our actions to inspire right choices. **She highlighted various initiatives of the Brahma Kumaris** such as solar energy and tree planting, and stressed that faith, representing 84% of the world's population, plays a crucial role alongside science, in shifting our relationship with nature and reversing biodiversity loss. Beyond preservation, the goal is human and ecological flourishing, with the power of prayer and meditation, helping to restore balance and harmony in the atmosphere and nature.

Astrid Schomaker explained to the Faith for Biodiversity Coalition that spirituality, once central to environmental discussions about 20 years ago, has faded, as negotiations shifted toward commodifying nature, though now science and spirituality are converging to recognize nature's value, beyond profit. This shift calls for fostering respectful relationships with nature, with a focus on women's roles, regenerative agriculture, and ethical conservation. At this tipping point, education, communication, and inclusive negotiations, like "COP de la Gente," are crucial for addressing climate change, desertification, and biodiversity together. A rights-based approach, gratitude for nature, and value-based stewardship are essential to ensure **intergenerational responsibility and to unite all stakeholders toward a sustainable future.**



Click on the little frog to listen to Colombia's National Anthem sung for its biodiversity



TRANSITIONING TOWARDS LIVING IN HARMONY



One of our big side-events was in the Nature Positive Pavilion. The event was called, “Navigating chaos and biodiversity pathways to living in harmony with nature”. Valeriane, Juan and Maureen spoke at the event that was moderated by David. Valeriane opened the session by using the analogy of a flower that grows from a seed and blooms into a beautiful blossom, but then shrivels, dies and rots, before producing seeds again for regeneration. She challenged us to think about “chaos” not as something bad to fear, but as a natural part of the cycle of life and, that the way to respond constructively is to simply be in peace and maintain inner stability. She shared examples of being in Chile during earthquakes and times of violence and how the only way to move towards harmony was to not let the external chaos divert you from your own values and principles.



After some story telling and sharing among participants, Maureen guided participants in a visioning exercise of the future world we want to live in and to use the process of visualization to do that. She spoke about her own experiences with natural disasters and the importance of maintaining people’s dignity by seeing everyone as our brothers and sisters. She shared **how any transformation needs to start from within, and then it’s possible to influence any chaos in a positive way** - and to realize what elements of the chaos cannot be influenced but to maintain one’s own dignity and peace. Maureen guided the meditation encouraging people to think about going into the depths of the ocean, finding beauty, silence and stillness there and that similarly, we can go within to the depths of our own selves and find power and wisdom from the heart of who we truly are, and use that power as a pathway towards peace during times of chaos.

Juan was able to share a **historical example** of traditional wisdom of the Iroquois people who formulated “the Great Law of Peace” that helped their communities overcome conflict and battling and set the rules for living in harmony, sharing resources and resolving disputes; this eventually became a foundational document of the US Constitution. He was also able to talk about and share images of a very different kind of a project - a regenerative farming initiative in India - which was also based on principles of permaculture and striving for harmonious relationships with nature, using nature-based solutions and, not trying to control nature in a predetermined way.

Powerful conversations opened up after the meditation, and the Green Team made personal contact with all the participants even though time was limited, so we could follow up at a later time. The perspective of the session was quite unique in the context of the COP discussions overall and, participants encouraged the team to try and do more events of this type in the future.





Enabling Conditions for Rights Based Conservation. There is currently a revolution happening between humanity and the environment. This inspiring session, that Debbie attended, demonstrated how Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities are stepping forward to claim their legal rights and the rights of all living entities. Presenters emphasized that these rights must be communicated clearly and simply. Important spiritual aspects were named, including respect for rights of all living beings; good faith in all interactions and protection against violations. It was great to see pathways of respect, trust and faith emerging regarding biodiversity conservation in communities with whole government and whole society participating!

Passing on Positive Thoughts on Making Peace with Nature.

One of the most valuable activities of the Green Team is passing on blessing cards - positive thoughts about making peace with nature in either English or Spanish - to fellow participants of the COP conference. This is often done as a thank you to presenters in various sessions following their talks. Words of gratitude for the work presenters have shared is followed with the gift of a blessing card and, sometimes a sweet, and a connection is made between the speaker's work and the values and philosophies that we care about. However, it is sometimes just a random moment in a line up for an event, while trying to find a table for lunch, at the bus stop or on the bus itself that a connection is made and a blessing card is passed on. The Green Team produced a series of 28 blessing / affirmation cards with sayings that begin with "you make peace with nature by ..." and with beautiful pictures of animals and nature on the reverse side. People really enjoy receiving the cards - and the message they get often resonates with them and leads to a lengthy value-based or spiritual discussion. As we work to serve nature, we can also serve those who serve nature and the blessing cards are a simple way to do just that.



Reception hosted by the Cali BK Centre. The BK Centre in Cali hosted an evening reception for friends at the Centre. Guests came and sat with the Green Team in an open circle to enjoy a conversation. Among them was a journalist, a long-time friend of the BKs, who spontaneously began asking Maureen and the Green Team questions that led to a spiritual exchange. The main topic that emerged during the evening, centered around how to transition towards a new world, where everyone will live in harmony with nature. One of the key elements underlined to make that transition possible, was a change of awareness happening in people's minds, and when this transition reaches a critical mass, a new world will be possible.



AWAKENING CONSCIOUSNESS: THE INTERCONNECTION OF HUMAN ACTION AND BIODIVERSITY

This presentation by the BK Green Team in the Faith-Based Organizations Pavilion focused on the impact of human consciousness in shaping attitudes and behaviors related to biodiversity - especially for healing the Earth. Valeriane interviewed Maureen and Juan and we also engaged the participants in a reflective conversation and a meditation. We invited an Indigenous elder from Colombia to join us, but unfortunately, he was committed to another event.


Maureen started the dialogue by helping participants understand that “whatever is within is reflected without” and that there is a **spiritual trajectory of Awareness, Attitude, Vision, Action and then, the World**. She described how if we create inner harmony that aligns with our deepest inner consciousness, then that will preserve harmony with nature and biodiversity. She referred to experiences in sustainable yogic farming in India where meditation has increased the quality and quantity of crops grown by meditating farmers.



Juan shared stories of Indigenous knowledge keepers and Brahma Kumaris teachings that have helped us be in harmony - within ourselves, in all our relations, and with nature. He emphasized that using a **values-based approach will help create the sacred space needed for healing the Earth**. Juan also inspired us to think about the small choices we make every day, to help us live in harmony with nature - by choosing between an apple from a local farmer rather than one imported from New Zealand! Being mindful of the little choices we make can have a big impact on the Earth. Also engaging in dialogue with others, to discover what we have in common, will help in healing ourselves and the Planet.

Maureen reminded us **to be true to our principles** and model them, so people will pay attention to discover how they too can respect nature and act mindfully. Juan invited us to be very humble and to surrender to new ways of thinking and seeing from new perspectives, to experience living from our values of compassion and respect for others. He shared how the COP is actually a space where we can experiment with accepting everyone and the roles they are playing; and how to appreciate nature and give back to nature in mindful ways.

Group members - who ranged from activists, to nature lovers, from faith leaders to academics - then shared stories of their experiences of giving back to nature that were quite emotional and touching. The session concluded with a beautiful meditation on peace and harmony with nature by Maureen.

 [Watch this event click here](#)

MINDFUL MOMENT. The Green Team offered a 30-minute Mindful Moment during the lunch break at the Faith-based Organizations' Pavilion. Anne-Christelle welcomed everyone with stretching and tapping movements, while keeping a spiritual awareness. Then, Maureen offered a meditation commentary aimed at strengthening participants' connection with the Self, with Nature and with the Divine. Despite the commotion of surrounding events and the heat, everyone left light and refreshed!





Another Hallway Encounter. Marcelo and Maria-Paula met the Foreign Secretary of Colombia, who has put his full energy and enthusiasm into the COP. They had few precious minutes with him and offer their gratitude for his efforts and shared the BKs desire for a value-based and spiritual approach to change. This resonated with the Minister and he happily accepted a blessing card and sweet they offered him and who ate it right away.

Meditation Room. A few of the Green Team members visited the COP16 "Meditation Room". This is a 3m x 3m square cement space set up in a corner of the parking garage without any furniture, decorations or even a carpet. It is a relatively quiet space, but seemed to represent a real lack of respect and understanding for the sacred nature of meditation or prayer. The team decided to check in with other faith group members and bring this issue up with the CBD Secretariat. Faith is an important element of many participants' lives and the meditation room could be given a more pleasant, respectful space in the conference venue.



Negotiations - Working Group II. Green Team members sat in on working group negotiations and were reminded of the systems and structures in place for decision-making and the immense effort it takes in a multilateral forum, such as this, to discuss and word-smith agreements in many different languages. Some substantive issues are debated based on a scientific or human rights understanding and some decisions are clearly influenced by a political agenda. With brackets and commas used as a way of setting aside controversial statements, the negotiators seem to work in the spirit of cooperation and caring for the Earth, and they all deserve and receive our gratitude and good wishes for the work they are doing.



Saturday October 26

Nature and Culture Summit. Manuel, Debbie and David attended the all-day Nature and Culture Summit, that was proposed as a reconciliation with nature, so we can survive as humanity. It began with a traditional ceremony by a Colombian Indigenous elder who brought a real sense of spirit into the gathering. He was accompanied by Pacha, another Indigenous spiritual leader who turned out to be a friend of Juan's uncle in California, who is an Indigenous elder himself.





Both the Colombian Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, spoke about the moment of crisis we are in and, the fundamental requirement now to revalue and reorder our world towards traditional knowledge and our relationship with nature so as to preserve ecosystems. A **Declaration on Peace with Nature was named as a dream**, as something that not only governments, but all stakeholders and all members of the COP, could sign as a way to be part of a new revitalized relationship with nature for the future.



Other speakers spoke of “nature as the art of God”, that there can be no nature conservation without people and, no people conservation and well-being without nature, and that we must revitalize the sacred spaces of Mother Earth, spaces for peace and spirituality. It was a discussion we felt very much at home in and would like to contribute and affirm what others were saying in this session, if space had been provided.

Following one of the panels, Manuel approached the stage to pass greetings to the **Scientific Director of UNESCO Lydia Brito**, who just spoken about the complimentary nature of culture, traditional knowledge, and science and the importance of respecting peoples’ cultural cosmo-visions. She seemed very pleased to receive our contact, had heard about the organization before and was intrigued that we were a university guided by spiritual principles. She spoke very authentically about her commitment to nurturing and promoting the **linkages between nature and culture**.

The World Biodiversity Summit in Cali, held alongside COP16 in the Green Zone, served as a platform to promote innovative biodiversity solutions. The summit, which Juan attended, emphasized nature-based solutions, partnerships, and sustainable investments as key mechanisms for combating biodiversity loss and fostering environmental restoration. Participants included a diverse group of stakeholders from the public and private sectors, including governments, businesses, civil society, and financial institutions. Through these collaborations, the event aimed to support the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework by exploring synergies between nature conservation and climate solutions.



One week in – One to go

That was a full and productive week for the team – and we are all looking forward to the second week. Peace.