Scene on Radio

Season 5, Episode 6: “We Don’t Have the Power to Fight It”

Transcript

Season 5 is made possible in part by listeners who’ve supported our show, and by a grant from the International Women’s Media Foundation.

John Biewen: Season 5 is made possible in part by listeners who’ve supported our show, and by a grant from the International Women’s Media Foundation.

John Biewen: Amy, the other day I was thinking back to my youth, those days of innocence, and trying to remember the first time I heard the words, “global warming,” which is of course what people called it back then.

Amy Westervelt: And did you remember? Do you remember the very first time?

John Biewen: I cannot remember the very first time specifically, but it was probably the late 70s ish. The later Jimmy Carter years, which was around the time you were arriving in the world, I think?

Amy Westervelt: Mm-hmm. ‘78, yeah.

John Biewen: You started to see stuff in the newspapers and on TV in those years.

Amy Westervelt: That's so interesting. It must have sounded exotic, kind of science-fiction-y, maybe? "Wait, what? The whole planet's going to get warmer because of this stuff people are pumping into the atmosphere?" So abstract.

John Biewen: I thought, it's just the air up there, right? The stuff that goes up into the air, doesn't it just keep going? Like, out into space? This was news, that it could be trapped and that could create problems long-term. Yeah, it was an entirely new conception, in a way, of how the world worked. So I'm in high school and it's not as if I'm glued to the news the way I would be later in life, so I actually don't remember *this*, you know, but I was looking at some stuff the other day—that President Carter ordered a report on the world's environment that the White House published in 1980. It warned of "pervasive changes" from global warming and urged "immediate action."

Amy Westervelt: Ugh. 1980. And of course that's a good decade or more after the oil companies were putting out their own reports, and even the U.S. government had been looking into this for a while, too. For me, I remember it just kind of being in the ether. This phrase, global warming, was showing up in presidential campaigns, but I wasn't necessarily paying that close attention to it. You know, George Bush senior talked about it, but it still seemed pretty abstract and far away, until I was in my 20s, in the early 2000s. And I just feel like today, like, I don't know that any kid born in the last 20 years ever had that moment of not knowing exactly what it was.

John Biewen: I also remember thinking at first, uh, hmm. global warming. A slightly warmer world? How bad can that be? I mean, keep in mind I grew up in Minnesota.

Amy Westervelt: Right, but even in California, where we already had quite warm weather all the time, you know, we had always had fires. I had grown up with droughts. When I started hearing about global warming, it was sort of like, okay, so maybe we'll have longer droughts, or we'll have a few more fires. It didn't—you know, I didn't know the science at the time, and I think if you didn't read the science closely, you probably wouldn't necessarily think that global warming was automatically going to be catastrophic. Of course, now we know different.

John Biewen: Yes. Most of us are a lot more familiar with the science and of course we're seeing it before our eyes. The effects are so much more complicated and so much more dire than just a higher reading on the thermometer.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, in some places the worst droughts in hundreds of years with devastating effects on farms and ranches and water supplies. Historic wildfires that just go on and on, including where I live in California, which is seeming less habitable every year. These fires, the last few years in particular, are nothing like the ones that I grew up with. They last for weeks and months and they include things like firenadoes and their own entire weather systems. You know? In other places, there's this unheard-of flooding from rainfall, rising sea levels swallowing coastal cities, like we heard in episode 5 from Jakarta. Once-in-a-century hurricanes now happening every year.

John Biewen: You’ve got lots of species pushed to extinction. Oceans made acidic by carbon, killing coral reefs and threatening other sea life. There's much more

coming, some of it happening now but certain to get way worse, especially if we don't move fast to stop spewing greenhouse gases. One other enormous source of suffering and conflict is, and will be, the displacement of people.

Amy Westervelt: It's huge, the way the changing climate is already pushing people to *move* – to escape disaster, or to leave an island that's sinking into the sea, or just to find the climate and the conditions that they depend on but which are now somewhere else, on someone else's territory.

John Biewen: That means conflict, and conflict can mean violence. For example, between farmers and traditional cattle herders in West Africa.

[Music: Theme]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio, Season 5: The Repair, Episode 6. I'm John Biewen.

Amy Westervelt: I'm Amy Westervelt. This time, we go to Nigeria, West Africa's most populous country. Analysts consistently say Africans, per capita, have contributed the least to the problem of climate change and the continent is the most vulnerable to climate chaos.

John Biewen: Environmental journalist Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo produced this episode from several regions of her home country. Here's Ugochi.

[Sound: Many voices in Makurdi Market]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: It's a market day in Makurdi, the capital of Benue State in Nigeria's Middle Belt. Vendors, who are mostly women, sell maize, yam, cassava, beans, guinea corn, vegetables, and more. They are beautifully displayed in buckets and grains are sold in paint or mudu cups. As in the rest of the country, food prices are higher than anyone can remember. In the last year, hundreds of thousands of households in Benue are struggling with daily rations. Traditionally, people here stored months, even years, of food in their homes despite the difficulty with food storage in Nigeria.

First person: But now, everything is cost higher!

Second Person: The last time, we bought about 22. Now we buy about 23,700.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Benue State is Nigeria's food basket. That's what I learnt and memorized as a child in elementary school. The state accounts for well over 70% of Nigeria's soybean production. With a population of about 6 million, Benue has the potential to feed all of Nigeria, with enough to spare. So, why are its people increasingly unable to find food?

Igbudua Ugende (speaking Tiv)

Voiceover: My name is Igbudua Ugende. There have been attacks on farmers for over ten years now. These have caused farmers to flee. They have been running away from their homes and there is no time to farm. That is why food is so expensive now.

[Music]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: The farmers in this region don't have the land to themselves. Benue State derives its name from River Benue, the second-largest in Nigeria. Nomadic cattle herders love Benue for its good soil, lush vegetation, and abundant water. For centuries, Fulani herders have travelled along traditional grazing routes from the north, some from as far as Chad and Niger, then returned north when the rains came. Climate change has brought deforestation and desertification and depleted water and arable land. So the herders are staying here in the south longer than usual. Mohammed Bello, a Fulani cattle rearer and a member of the Confederation of Traditional Livestock Breeders Association in West Africa, explains the situation.

Mohammed Bello: In the last 20 to 30 years, we have the depletion of rainfall, you know, depletion in terms of pasture, lower grass production by—in the area. So this has made herders to move more towards the southern part of the country, outside their traditional ecological migratory zones. Now they have moved outside those zones into areas that they don't used to move to.

[Music]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Benue State has not known peace for more than two decades. People fight over cattle grazing and access to scarce water. Hundreds of thousands have died and the violence has displaced more than half a million people. As herders graze the farmlands longer than they usually do, local farmers feel uneasy and want to assert their rights to their farms and produce. Herders also accuse farmers of killing their cows. When the resulting clashes destroy homes and farmland, many farmers move to displaced people's camps, where the government and donations feed and house them. At this camp in Abagana, farmers like Ukwase, Adooshe, and Igbazua talk about why they cannot return home.

Ukwase (speaking Tiv)

Voiceover: I am here at the IDP Camp because they killed my son Adasu, they shot him in the month of May and we could not even bury him, because we had to run for our lives.

Adooshe (Tiv)

Voiceover: I don't have any yam seedling, no cassava stem, they have killed my family members. I am going through mental and physical trauma. I don't know what to do. See me helpless sitting at this camp. I would have been happy, but I cannot go near my home.

Igbazua (Tiv)

Voiceover: I was peacefully living in my ancestral home until herdsmen came to attack us. They killed three of my brothers. We were working together. The situation was beyond what we could handle and we could not stay at our home.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: The goodwill between farmers and nomadic herders is another casualty of this conflict.

Igbazua (Tiv)

Voiceover: We lived with herdsmen in the past. Even when you planted and their cattle ate, we would talk and have agreements. But now that they have turned to something else, when their cattle eat your crop and you complain, they will pull their gun. When you insist to talk loudly, they kill you.

[Music]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Half a century ago, Nigeria had 417 grazing reserves in the north. But these reserves were mismanaged and abandoned by the federal government. Cattleman Mohammed Bello says this neglect is also at the root of the herder-farmer clashes in central and southern Nigeria.

Muhammed Bello: So these areas have actually in the past been depleted because one, because of encroachment, two, farmers are taking some of it, three, because of insecurity and other things.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: During our recording in Nyiti Village close to Makurdi town, people told us about an attack in the neighboring village that killed three of their relatives. The people we spoke with warned us to leave immediately because the assailants were still around. Thousands of farmers, especially women with small holdings, are afraid to go onto their farms. Along with armed attacks, they have to worry about changing weather patterns.

Zaki Agena Laki (Tiv)

Voiceover: I am a farmer, something I inherited from my forefathers many years ago.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: 80-year-old Zaki Agena Leke is a leader and counselor in Genabe village.

Zaki Agena Leke (Tiv)

Voiceover: Climate change has greatly affected us. Crops like yams don't do well with too much rain. However, you need rain to plant them. This year, the rains came late and we are already affected as the yams are not doing well.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: He believes that God is the one turning the climate wheels.

Zaki Agena Leke (Tiv)

Voiceover: God is in charge. He has seasons. For those of us who believe in God, we think maybe God is changing seasons because of our inconsistent behavior. All we can do now is to pray to God for His forgiveness.

[Music]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: But is God changing weather patterns, or is it human beings? Climate scientist Benard Tyubee from the Benue State University says change in climate affects environmental function and socio-economic activities.

Benard Tyubee: The changes affect mostly the seasons. There is a gradual shift in the rainy season, the season is shifting around two weeks. The farmers are also affected by flooding, especially those that have their farms along the plains and valleys and along river courses. We also have some landslides triggered by heavy rainfall.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: In 2017, heavy rains caused the Benue River to overflow. The floods displaced 100,000 people and destroyed about 2,000 homes. Many farmers are still counting their losses.

Man (Tiv)

Voiceover: That flood! That flood was a blow to me. I lost everything: my house, food, livestock, my farm, and everything.

Woman (Tiv)

Voiceover: I was sick and hospitalized when the floods came, but my children were at home. The floods destroyed our food and household items. They were taken to the internally displaced people's camp, where I later joined them. Now we are back home.

Zaki Agena Leke (Tiv)

Voiceover: Sometimes the rains are too much, sometimes the rain doesn't even fall, sometimes they come late. This has led to low production, unlike it used to be years back. Even in the market, there is poor food supply and this has affected the cost of farm produce. We would cultivate groundnuts and sesame seeds. Nowadays, we don't get enough rains even in May. In 2017, floods destroyed homes and farms and further increased the number of internally displaced persons.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Tooni Oyeyemi runs farms in Lagos and Ogun states. He has noticed an influx of displaced farmers into Lagos and he has employed some of them.

Tooni Oyeyemi: I've actually noticed quite a lot of displaced farmers from the northern part of Nigeria, so from places like Benue State and also some of the Igbo states as well, coming to Lagos and Ogun looking for work. And they actually leave their families behind to get a one-year contract just to get some work so they can send money back home. Many of them have wives and children that are also displaced, and they're living with different relatives in different places.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Tyubee says the changes affect the entire food chain. Still, he believes that farmers and herders can adapt to the changes.

> **Benard Tyubee:** Even though any ways of resolving issues create challenges for themselves. But if we look at some of these emerging issues holistically, we can devise some innovative ways that are more sustainable.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: With the growing threat to food security, others promote a return to traditional farming as the best way to adapt. Zaki Leke, the farmer from Genabe, says that would mean shifting away from crops that farmers have grown accustomed to planting.

> **Zaki Leke (Tiv)**
>
> **Voiceover:** Tiv people have a saying that, it is how the bees sting you that you know how to run. In trying to adapt to this climate change, we are, at best, trying to simply gamble. Because of this, we have also moved from yams to cassava. You know, cassava can survive better in such inconsistent weather conditions because, even with no rains at all, you can plant cassava by the stream or rivers.
>
> [Music]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: If a farming state like Benue—where whole barns of yams, mangoes and even bags of oranges are randomly given out as gifts to

visitors—could be in this situation, it is clear that those who usually rely on Benue for food are worse off. It deeply hurts me to know that my country's food crises may linger for several years. In Benue State, the disruption has kept elders like Zaki Leke from passing along their farming skills and local agriculture knowledge to the next generation, who are growing up in displaced people's camps.

Samson Terungwa Derigba: Samson Terungwa Derigba.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Ten-year-old Samson Terungwa Derigba has spent some of his childhood in the displaced people's camp after his family fled their home, but he has not forgotten life in his village.

Samson (Tiv)

Voiceover: We used to go to farm, harvest yams, roast, and eat. Here at this camp, there is no food. We cannot even farm. That is why I prefer my home.

[Music]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: His dream seems so far away because of turmoil in the state that used to feed his entire country.

[Break]

[Sound: beach, surf]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: It's a beautiful day at Okun Alfa beach on the edge of Lagos. The sun is out, unlike the previous day when it had rained heavily throughout the day. Okun Alfa was once a thriving beachside community and for several decades a lot of Nigerians spent their weekends at this beach. About 10,000 people live here by the Gulf of Guinea-Atlantic Ocean.

> [Sound: Man asking his daughter for a shovel. Shoveling sound]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: We found Akinsanya Idris offloading bags filled with broken blocks which he had collected from an abandoned construction site. He is placing them right at the front of his house to stop the flood waters from inundating his bungalow.

> **Akinsanya Idris:** I did it to make it about two feet high. Yes, I'm doing this to protect my business and my home. [Sound: car horn] That is why I'm doing this. This measure was not effective. I bagged sand, you know, to make it, to be preventive, but actually it was not. So that is why I'm opting out for broken blocks.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Akinsanya was not born here but remembers what it looked like when he moved back to live in his family home about 20 years ago. He had imagined a beautiful communal life close to nature, a breathtaking ocean view and perfect environment.

Akinsanya Idris: I've been here for about 15 to 20 years now. There was about, if I'm not exaggerating, about ten plots between my house before the shore. Now there's just one plot between house and the shore. One plot. My father's farm used to be somewhere there. We would go to farm, you know, to pluck some coconuts. And before, you could get to that farm. After that, before you get to that beach, all of them have gone. No memories again, except the fear of the unknown, that tomorrow you might just wake up to now discover that the ocean has taken over your heritage. Behind you, I know one, that when I moved in here, that the woman died. They buried her in front of her house. Now the ocean has taken over the house, including the grave.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: He is constantly overwhelmed by fear that his home may be swallowed by the encroaching ocean. He hopes the roaring waters don't come crashing in on him in his sleep.

Akinsanya Idris: This is our home. This is our village. We don't have any other place to go. If I leave here now, there is no place I could trace back that 'this is my hometown.' So if ocean take over our village, where do I go? I'm fighting, but we don't have the power to fight it.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: The area is at the mercy of a rising ocean with surges becoming a constant experience for people here, sweeping away homes, livelihoods, entire villages, and the history of a people. By the year 2050, experts say, the seas will rise by more than three feet. That may inundate Lagos—Nigeria's commercial center and the largest city in sub-Saharan Africa. All this worries newcomers to the

shore, like Eric, who has lived in a little shanty here the past five years. He is among the many slum dwellers who call Okun Alfa home.

> **Eric:** For like four years to five years now, I've been living in this here. Before it was like far distance! But now we surprised. It just come close. We are people here, family people, husband and wife staying here. So no place to go.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: It is hard for settlers, but for Chief Yusuf Elegushi Atewolara, the Baale—that's the community head—the situation is heartbreaking. He was seated in his palace, an uncompleted bungalow, when we arrived. It is totally empty, except for a few plastic chairs.

> **Chief Yusuf Elegushi Atewolara:** Water takes so much of land from us.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: As he shows me photos of past surges, he recalls where the graves of his ancestors once stood. He remembers the joy of communal living among the communities along the shoreline. He also bears the burden on his feeble shoulders and looks overwhelmed, especially because he can do absolutely nothing to help the people who depend on him to protect the land.

> **Chief Yusuf Elegushi Atewolara:** Most of the land, the one that have selled to people, the beach has come and take it. What can I do? I can't, I can't hold the water.

> [Music]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: The beach is protected by local groups. You must be guided by a local to explore after paying a fee to get in. It's a race to make quick profit before everything finally disappears. Regina Folorunsho is director of the Marine Meteorology and Climate Department at the Nigerian Institute for Oceanography and Marine Research. She has worked with ocean communities to gauge tides and analyze their impacts.

> **Regina Folorunsho:** In the coastal communities, they do not have pipe-bound water. They depend on shallow wells, that is, shallow-dug wells, for their domestic use. And the amount of salt in the water, which is the salinization of the domestic water due to encroaching sea levels, will affect their health. They will have skin rashes, they could have diarrhea because of ingestion of too much salt in their system. And a whole lot of other health issues. Yeah, the coconuts are going at a fast rate, eh? And those coconuts are very important to coastal communities because the coconut oil is used for cooking, the oil is also used for skin care, and when they have rashes and all that it is the coconut oil that helps. But now we have the coconuts in [the] water. No more coconuts.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: For several years, the Lagos state government has worked to check the roaring ocean by constructing concrete embankments. Locals point to a section of the coast that suddenly received a great amount of sand, more like an island in a disappearing community. It seemed like a miracle when they were suddenly able to open businesses once again. Shortly after, people set up small

restaurants and bars on this little patch of the coast. There is fear, though, that this joy may not last so long.

Regina Folorunsho: The communities will continue to be vulnerable to sea level rise. They are highly threatened. Because if the rate of erosion in Lagos is between 25 and 35 meters per year, then you have to do the calculations. The only solution is to have them relocate.

[Music]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: The same embankment has created more problems for a neighboring seafront town, Lafiaji. It channeled the surge in their direction. Dr Joseph Onoja is the director, Technical Programmes, Nigerian Conservation Foundation, an organization that has been working on coastal erosion issues since 2017. He joined me on the ground at Lafiaji.

Joseph Onoja: You see, number one, this is Atlantic Ocean. And Atlantic Ocean has a brutal current. It's very brutal, that's number one. And secondly, we have tampered with nature, and usually when you tamper with nature you compromise its ability to withstand this kind of pressure. And this road, in April when we visited, this road was just at the verge of it. Now it has, it's in the road. This was just three months ago. And even that time, I said that in July— because July is generally the month of the high tide— I suspected that this will happen. I said one day we will wake up, we will see the ocean on the expressway.

[Music]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: In 2016, 2017, and 2018, I visited Okun Alfa and Lafiaji to file stories on ocean surges that had affected communities and buildings a little more than half a mile from the ocean. Every year when I returned within those years, many of the homes I saw before had vanished. In 2021, I wondered what happened to the buildings about half a mile from the ocean. I discovered that between 2017 and July 2021, about 100 meters of land has been washed into the ocean. As the ocean comes closer, shanty dwellers say they will be forced to move into a newly constructed development belonging to Chevron, right in front of them. Most of the one-story houses are empty.

Eric: Chevron is the comp—it's the oil company people.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: It's the Chevron you know, the multinational fossil fuel company.

Online real estate advertisement: [Music]

Woman: Behind these gates is a master plan, and every piece put in place is to give you the feeling of a real home.

Man: And I promise you, you do not have to break a bank to own one of these plots.

Woman: Because Obika Realtors Limited is giving you easy installment payments such that you can spread for six to eighteen months with zero interest.

Man: Whoo! [Clapping sound as they high-five] And please, people….

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Advertisements enticing prospective homeowners to invest in Lekki have increased in the last decade. Lekki is for the rich. It's the Miami Beach of Nigeria. Despite the extreme sea level rise, the real estate business is booming.

Onochie Okwusogu, demonstrating sales pitch: OK, ladies and gentlemen, first of all, I would like to introduce you to Rehoboth Real Estate, where you escape from the ordinary.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Onochie Okwusogu is a gospel musician but he spends more time wooing investors than in the studio. To provide for his family of four, he had to find another stream of income.

Onochie Okwusogu: [Demonstrating sales pitch] Close to the seaside, even when it rains, you don't need to think about anything so much because finally it will rain money on you if you bank on that land.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo, in interview OK, well, you never mentioned that the sea might rise! Why?

Onochie Okwusogu: Well, um, we are in Lagos. Lagos is an island. And, though the sea may rise, but that is because of poor drainage systems here. For someone who buys land where it is waterlogged, you can actually make a lot of money from that place when it develops. When we say come and buy land we are not saying come and buy water. So we're saying we can manage these things and we can live with these things.

[Music]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Ekamma Uyo Ufot sells real estate in Lagos Island. Her Ikoyi office floods often. A day before our interview, she called with bad news. She is experiencing the worst flooding ever.

Ekamma Uyo Ufot, voicemail: Hello, Ugochi. So, the situation is really bad. I've had to leave the office now. I had a visitor in my office. Whilst we were having this meeting, water started rushing in, so we had to leave.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: When I arrived the next day, I found total destruction of the company property.

Ekamma Uyo Ufot: These are some of the documents that have been destroyed. Not just documents but office furnitures, appliances are all bad. Even to the doors, you can see what the water has done here. So this is the boardroom here. All the chairs were submerged in water. The water was at

the window level. The children from school were swimming in the water! That's how high the water was!

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: This has not stopped her from encouraging buyers to invest but she now goes a step further to tell clients what to do to save their property from what she's experiencing.

Ekamma Uyo Ufot: You have to put a lot of energy and do a lot of convincing, trying to get people to buy into these properties. Now this property is going for 200 million. You have to bring it down, there is no—I've suggested to the buyer not to renovate. Fill up and then build up. It's not stopping anytime soon! This is me being brutally sincere. What I see right now, I can tell you that in the last five years, in the last six years, we did not see. The disaster is progressive. Things are getting worse than they used to be before.

[Music]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: The dramatic changes have been so swift, one can only imagine what will become of this area in the months and years to come.

Joseph Onoja: This is practical. I was here in April, and the road is no more. The road is no more. So you don't know what will happen in the next three months. I hope we survive July. But we may not survive next July. I hope we survive it, but we will not survive next July, not at this rate.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo, in interview: Not at this rate.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: The people living right by the shores cannot imagine this possibility. They are struggling to stop a rapidly rising sea, fighting to stop man's activities and businesses that destroy their environment. Akinsanya is eager to ensure his home doesn't end up like those of his relatives: on the ocean floor.

Akinsanya Idris: Like what my uncle said, this is the second place. He said, this is the second place, the first place is inside the water already. When my father was building here, everywhere was bush. My father was the first person who came to build this house, here, before water started taking over all the houses *then.* Now, the second place now, they're still going. After a year, I don't think there's any other land for us to migrate to.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Akin's 96 year old aunty, Alhaja Alayakin, has also lived through these changes. She has moved 3 times as her homes keep getting swallowed. This is her 4th home.

Alhaja Alayakin (speaking Yoruba)

Voiceover: Thankfully no one has died. All the houses we built, the sea eroded them all. Our bungalows and duplexes collapsed. It has not always been like this. Things got this way when the government started drilling for water as well as digging and transporting sand for sale to build houses. We are really suffering now. There are no fish or roads, water or electricity.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: She cannot stop the racing sea, so she prays.

Alhaja Alayakin (Yoruba)

Voiceover: May God have mercy on us, our parents and children, at home and abroad. May God not cause us to suffer, be afraid, or die painful deaths. Amen.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: It's a race against time, and time doesn’t stop.

[Sound: Beach surf, fades out]

[Music: Egedege, featuring Theresa Onuorah]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Egwu Egedege, a cultural classic welcoming me to the South East of Nigeria, Ala Igbo, where I come from. Unlike in Lagos where the ocean is washing the land away, here, another source of water is melting solid ground. Home to the Igbo, one of Nigeria’s major tribes of more than 30 million people, land in the South East is valuable. The region is a little smaller than New Jersey and New Hampshire put together. Problems—including armed attacks on government personnel and facilities—have plagued the area for months. The government blames these skirmishes with gunmen on a secessionist group that calls for the restoration of the state of Biafra. Yes, Biafra, the region whose starving children, in the late 1960s, your mother may have told you about, if you were a child then, when you refused to finish your dinner. The secessionists claim they have established a regional security outfit to drive out traditionally nomadic herders, whom they also

accuse of invading their land. A bigger threat, though, is the erosion that destroys roads, undermines houses, and washes farmlands away. Bartholomew Okeiyi, a 90-year-old man, lives close to an erosion site in his village in Oguduasaa, Isuikwuato, in Abia State.

> **Bartholomew Okeiyi:** I didn't lose my farmyard. I losed going to see my brothers and my sisters, outside. The stream is there, there. We cannot to go there, fetch our water. No road. No road. No road to there. We need the help, nobody to help us.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: When we spoke, local leaders had just ended a meeting about the erosion menace. All the men related similar experiences. But they held different ideas about what caused the problems.

> **First man:** In our farmland, the erosion used to carry away all the plants that my people planted on their farm. The erosion carry everything and level everything.

> **Second man:** Mainly, our land is very soft, so that is the major problem we have.

> **First man:** I have a palm plantation. Since that time, I can never go to my plantation, because no vehicle will go there. It's too hard for us to do. We don't have the money.

Hart Enwerem: The center can no longer hold. And we, it's quite unfortunate that our people are starving. Starvation has taken over the land.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Hart Enwerem, a public servant and one of the community leaders who lives in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, has returned to his village to help save it from erosion.

Hart Enwerem: It keeps you on your toes. Because you don't know what's gonna happen the next minute. Sometimes we are called up from Abuja, from Lagos, from London, from the UK. 'Hey, your house is being submerged, your house is almost going.' Of course you need to run to see what you can do. About forty percent of my income go in here, to ensure that I can have a road to come into my community. I put it in not because I have the money but because we, the Igbos, we believe that home is the ultimate. No matter where you are, you have to come home.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: The leaders resolved to re-pave the road once more. It's a local solution to an enormous problem.

First man: As the community leader, I put on a general work. The whole men in the community, they have tried and do the work so that motor[cars] can enter our community, our market square. But the other side, we are trying to put another general work this week. I'm praying to God every day. My prayers is that the government will come and remember us and help us.

[Sound: heavy rain]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Intense rainfall and runoff are creating gullies up to 55 feet deep, and wide enough to swallow 6-storey buildings. The Nigerian Emergency Management Agency indicates that in 2020, flooding directly affected more than 2 million people.

TVC News, August 2020, announcer: The Nigeria Hydrological Services Agency is advising Nigerians in some states to prepare for flooding to avert the loss of lives and property….

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Extreme weather events in Nigeria, made worse and more frequent by climate change, contribute to the problem of erosion. Four days after a heavy rain near Owerri city, the capital of Imo state, a passenger car gets stuck while trying to navigate around gullies in the road.

[Sound: vehicle’s wheels screeching in mud, drivers shouting.]

Man 1: It’s has affected everything—it affects life.

Man 2: Yeah, because the bad roads is something, is getting out of hand.

Man 3: And yesterday there was fighting in my streets. And also, we tried calling the police but how can the police come when there is a bad road?

Man 2: After spending so much money on the car, I cannot be plying this road on a daily basis. I will leave the area.

Man 1: Houses, houses are not safe. Human beings are not safe because you can be washed out by erosion. And all the rest of that, so no person is free. No person is free, you know?

[Sound: Bird chirping loudly, woman calling out]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: The major road leads to the Imo Zoo, a two-and-a-half acre zoological garden outside the state capital. Normally, it attracts hundreds of visitors every day. It is also the only functioning zoo in the entire region. When this zoo opened in 1976, the land beneath and around it was solid. These days, because erosion destroyed the road, it is an empty park. Its Chief Security Officer, Emmanuel Achan, relaxes on one of the beautiful clay molded seats because there is no activity at the zoo.

Emmanuel Achan: No visitors have come in. Unlike before, like, before we have been having excursions, school has been pouring in, and everything was moving on okay. Revenue was coming in. Everything is just down because of this road, because it's the major problem affecting this zoo. Because there is no way we can develop money to take care of this zoo and the animals at large.

[Music]

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: I am from a community ravaged by erosion. In fact, that's what my village is known for: "Ndi Amucha ozhe na ezhegbushi," which means "Amucha people who are being swallowed up by erosion." That's part of why I decided to become an environmental journalist. The community blames one man for the erosion, one man who killed a python. The python, *Eke*, is sacred in Amucha. It is the symbol of the river, mmiri Njaba. Killing or eating it is forbidden. Local folklore says his actions were responsible for the erosion. It is shaped like the python, and in its quest to find and punish the offender, over 2,000 families lost their homes and farmland.

Since 1994, men and women from all over the world have gathered at the annual Conference of the Parties, COP, part of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change, to discuss ways of reversing human activities that have led to climate change. After decades of unending deliberations, developing countries like Nigeria are already feeling the impact of the climate crisis.

[Music]

Amy Westervelt: Ugochi, such good work.

John Biewen: It's overwhelming, hearing about these weather and climate effects, and what it means for people's lives. From the rising sea, to the heavier rains inland, making the erosion problem worse than ever.

Amy Westervelt: Even violence, in Benue, the food basket, as people move in different patterns because of the changing climate. What's it like, Ugochi, to travel in your country right now and witness what's happening?

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: I mean, it's hard. I am an African environmental journalist. I tell stories of disasters, pollution, climate change, and climate refugees, and environmental injustice. So much of it is connected to neo-colonialism. And I'm not documenting the pain of someone else's community. These are my own people. And I'm a journalist with so much to lose. That's what I always tell myself: you have so much to lose. And also the work leaves emotional and psychological marks. Now, the violence between herders and farmers in Benue State grows out of longstanding ethnic tensions and a lot of competition for land and resources, but it seems quite undeniable that climate change, by changing the movements of the nomadic herders, is really making matters much, much worse.

John Biewen: Ugochi, you mention neo-colonialism. This has been a theme of our series, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Nigeria won independence in 1960 after almost six decades as a British colony. Most African countries gained independence from Western empires in the 1950s and 60s, some in the 70s. But the so-called post-colonial era isn't really all that post-colonial, is it?

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: No, no. Foreign control and exploitation has simply taken different forms. One of the most important is the dominating presence of Western corporations, including, of course, oil companies. Nigeria, as you may know, is the top oil-producing country in Africa. The industry's presence has really meant jobs

and wealth for a tiny percentage of the population. And most people in the main oil region, that's the Niger Delta, live in extreme poverty. Meanwhile, companies like Royal Dutch Shell and other oil companies have left the delta to be what is one of the most polluted places on the planet.

Amy Westervelt: It's so brutal what's happened there. For decades, Royal Dutch Shell and its Nigerian subsidiary spilled vast amounts of oil into the river and onto the land. They really ruined a way of life for thousands of people in communities that lived by fishing in the Niger.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Absolutely. The damage has been very well-documented for more than a decade, but the oil companies have barely started to clean up the mess they made. In 2015, 40,000 people in Niger Delta communities brought a lawsuit against the British arm of Royal Dutch Shell. And in 2020, the UK Supreme Court ruled that the case can go to trial in a British court. The trial is expected in 2022, that's twenty twenty-two. But whatever happens in that courtroom, it won't heal the damage the oil companies did on the land and the water. I've been to these places, I've seen them myself, and it's horrible.

John Biewen: Near the end of your piece, you talked about COP, the UN climate conference, and other international meetings that you have attended over the years.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: I've covered a few of them. It can be really draining and frustrating. Because the rich and powerful countries and companies are always present, including those who have drawn lots and lots of money from Nigeria while

leaving behind polluted water and land and even the air. No one with power holds them accountable, really, and they shamelessly work to protect their interests: that is, their freedom to continue extracting more fossil fuels for short-term profit.

Amy Westervelt: Thank you, Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Thank you so much for having me.

[Music]

John Biewen: Amy, we're talking here in the fall of 2021, just ahead of the next big international climate summit in Glasgow, COP26. I gotta ask you, does this moment feel any different from previous years? Do you have any expectations that the world's rich countries are finally ready to get serious?

Amy Westervelt: Honest answer? Not really. I have to say, I mean, the status quo is still the status quo and the powers that be are bringing the same old ideas to the table. *But* one thing that does strike me as somewhat different is that outside pressure is really building. There's always been activists showing up at COP for at least the last ten, fifteen years, but this time it feels more urgent and just harder for them to ignore. You know, the activists are really just not letting folks [get] away with, sort of, the usual approach to this conference. So, you had Scottish activist Lauren MacDonald reading Shell CEO Ben Van Beurden the riot act at a TED event leading up to COP. There's this video of her that went viral where she's like looking him dead in the eyes and pinning the deaths of thousands of people on him personally. And

now this week there was an Indigenous-led protest at the British Museum. I know for a fact that there’s a lot more of both of those sorts of actions to come, so I have a tiny sliver of hope that some of this will at least maybe make them feel like they have to do something to not be publicly shamed.

John Biewen: Ugochi talked about short-term profits, which people in the fossil fuel industry have always fought like hell to protect. That’s what is so frustrating and honestly confounding for, I don’t know, regular people who care about the world we live in, our children, other people’s children, other animals and plants and their children, the common good, you know?

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, all that old-fashioned stuff.

John Biewen: And I know this must be something you’ve pondered given the huge amount of research you’ve done on oil company execs and public relations men, and the politicians who do their bidding.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah. All of these people who worked so long and hard to deny what their own scientists knew to be true: that pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere would change our world, ultimately with catastrophic effects.

John Biewen: So how—I mean, I’m having trouble even formulating the question. But what’s the thought process? How do these people sleep at night? And what’s their endgame, do you think?

Amy Westervelt: I think about this a lot, actually. I'm kind of fascinated by how people, just, what sorts of logical gymnastics they have to go through to behave this way, you know? To, I don't know, forget that they're also living on this planet, and that they also have grandchildren that will inherit this mess. You know, I think they have to either be truly convinced that it's not going to be as bad as all the scientists say or just be so focused on their own short-term gain that it doesn't matter, maybe? But anyway, I do spend a lot of time researching terrible people, and in this very weird and maybe surprising way, it gives me a certain amount of, maybe not hope, exactly, but kind of, courage? Because it's not "human nature" that did this, or even just capitalism and how capitalism works. It's a handful of specific people who made specific choices. I don't know how they sleep at night, but I sleep dreaming about a different group of specific people making different choices, and how those choices are having an impact too, and could still save us from the absolute worst. If we act, and act fast and big. People are working really hard, in Nigeria and all over the planet, even in the U.S., to change things and to adapt and, hopefully, to contribute to an actual, lasting repair of this problem.

[Music]

John Biewen: Stay with us. There is more to come in this series from other spots on the globe, and eventually we'll go straight at the question of what we have to do, collectively. What repair might mean.

John Biewen: Our script editor for Season 5 is Cheryl Devall. Production and mixing by me. Ugochi had recording and production help from:

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo: Nchetachi Chukwuaja, Jennifer Okoro, Awa Osu, Tim Cuttings Agber, Abraham Aondo, Kayode Oloyede, Director Simon Oboh, Faith Anao-Afolabi—and my loving father, Innocent Anyaka. Rest in peace.

John Biewen: Translations and voiceovers by Oluwabamise Onabanjo, Msendoo Damhindi, Arinze Okafor, Jide Olutoke, and Fati Abubakar. Music in this episode by Lili Haydn, Kim Carroll, Chris Westlake, Lesley Barber, Cora Miron, Alex Weston, Fabian Almazan, and Maetar. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. We post transcripts on our website: sceneonradio.org. The show is distributed by PRX, and comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.