

# AtlanticMonthly

## The Inspirational Women profile **Angelique MacLeod**

Interview by Sophie O'Mara

*19th August 2022*

**T**his month we are featuring one of the many remarkable women who have steered us through these incredibly challenging times, transitioning into a new way of living with nature and each other. She is Angelique MacLeod also known as Anne, a witch, who has been a powerful leader instrumental in creating the independent Uist Islands' Coöperative in the Outer Hebrides, Scotland and the worldwide Islands' Consortium.

I recently interviewed her niece Indigo MacLeod who pioneered the ethical social media platform WeTu, which we all know and love, who told me what a huge inspiration her aunt had been for her and many others. They are a remarkable family – Indigo's mother is the peace negotiator Ursula MacLeod who turned down the Nobel Peace Prize back in 2038 – but that's another story!

I meet Angelique on Zipstar, as it still not that easy to get to Uist! She is a handsome woman in her seventies with piercing blue-green eyes framed with laughter lines, a tumble of unruly silver curls, an armful of silver bangles and an otter tattoo curled around her forearm “A totem animal for me, we've many here. Fierce and playful creatures that they are – I love them!”

She tells me that she was born in Nova Scotia but her people were cleared from South Uist in the 19th century. Several generations intermarried with first nation people, the Mi'kmaq but the matrilineal MacLeod's kept their name and passed it on to their children. So she felt a strong connection to her Hebridean roots.

“We've always been witches, wise women and healers with knowledge handed down from way back, as well as learning a thing or two from the Mi'kmaq.” She says.

They managed to stay free of persecution for generations by being smart, secretive, sticking together and being very helpful to their communities.

“We believe wholeheartedly in magic – the basis of which is that everything and everyone is interconnected: ‘interbeing’ – and its application in everyday life.”

Professionally, she's a medical herbalist, treating animals, humans and plants but has learned an impressive range of people skills along the way. This coupled with her warmth and enthusiasm, far-sightedness and can-do attitude, has made her a natural leader.

“My family have always been concerned about the way humans treat the earth and it's other inhabitants. As that sense of separation from nature escalated, my generation felt called to work in the wider world – to bring magic out into the open and accessible to many people. I worked with environmental groups and my sister, Ursula brought the spirit of ‘interbeing’ to world negotiating tables.”

“How did you end up in Uist?” I ask

“I came in the Reckless 20’s with a young Indigo –Ursula was *so* busy– to reconnect with our original land and people. We didn’t intend to stay long but things were changing so fast and we found ourselves useful, so we stayed.”

Uist is a string of six small islands connected by causeways, in the Outer Hebrides, north west of mainland Scotland and south of Lewis and Harris. Mainly low-lying, with a population of about 5,000, they are particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events and rising sea levels. Incredibly, when Anne arrived, there was no female representation at all on the regional council! That was when the climate crisis was just starting to get through to people en masse, due to the terrible heat waves, forest fires and droughts in Europe and the US.

Anne recalls energy prices going through the roof that winter so people were choosing food or warmth. “But interesting things started to happen. Some people set up ‘warm rooms’ and that got people together, talking. And the talk was ‘no’ we’re not putting up with this any more – ‘freezing to death while obscene profits are being made’. Do you remember the energy bill payment strikes in Britain, which eventually led to energy companies being nationalised? I think that was the start really – people realising that acting together, they have power.”

This is where Anne’s facilitation skills came in – helping people work together and make things happen on a local level.

She says “The weather got stormier, with ferries cancelled and empty shelves in the Co-op for days on end. It got through to islanders how vulnerable we were, how dependant. A group got together to build more polycrubs to grow food. The abattoir reopened, which meant we could eat local meat again. People looked out for each other and shared more, as they were used to doing in these islands. “

“Polycrubs?” I ask

“Island saviours!” She laughs “They’re polytunnels designed in Shetland to withstand 120mph gales, made from polycarbonate sheeting and recycled fish farm pipes. We can grow so much more than we could outside.”

“As low lying houses and roads got flooded with increasing frequency,” she continues “it got a lot worse. People moved to higher ground if they could and travelling became a nightmare. The *Comhairle* quickly ran out of funding to re-site roads and housing. Eventually the Scottish Government offered everyone resettlement grants to move to the mainland, saying they couldn’t afford to subsidise the islands any longer. That was a watershed. There were terribly difficult meetings, with a lot of people wanting to take the money and go – who could blame them, it was getting harder and harder to live here – St Kilda all over again. But for others it was ‘over my dead body’ particularly crofting families whose land had been so hard won. A consensus could not be arrived at – despite my best efforts! The Scottish Government said if people wanted to stay behind then they’d have to fend for themselves. No subsidies for infrastructure, ferries, mitigating climate change etc and a very curtailed health service. It was sobering.”

This was during the period when huge changes were taking place across the planet, that were largely about people wresting power from the oligarchs and handful of sociopath billionaires that ran the world and starting to create systems that cared for the planet and all its beings. Some of it was violent, inevitably, but a lot was about sheer numbers of people whose focus had shifted, as Anne says “from ‘me, my, mine’ to ‘we, us, ours’.”

“So here, we’d been given this impossible choice, stay or go, all or none. Lots of meetings, lots of anger and grief but in the end we negotiated a compromise. So those who wanted could take the money and go and the rest of us formed a coöperative, with equivalent start up funding, to run the islands independently, transitioning to net zero. Growing as much of our food as possible; eating the animals that thrive here; shellfish farming; stabilising the dunes; generating our own energy; building eco-black houses on higher ground; taking more responsibility for our health; repairing everything; sharing transport and running our own boats to the mainland. It was a tough time, involving a lot of hard work but islanders are no strangers to that! When the ICC came in we started to do well financially – paid at last for sequestering significant amounts of carbon, through protecting the sea grass, kelp beds and peatlands. This meant we could eventually afford to buy a ferry boat that runs on solar, wind and hydrogen. It’s fantastic!” She says with a grin.

Similar shifts were happening all over the world at this time, when people started working together locally to create more equitable lives that looked after all, human and more-than. Out of this came greater national democracy: Peoples Assemblies made decisions that supported solutions on many levels from big geo-engineering projects to local regenerative agriculture coöps. Once the bankers were on board with the ICC, things changed on the global market and that was when atmospheric CO2 really started to drop.

I ask about her leadership role.

“I’m not quite comfortable with being described as a leader” she says “Collectively we’ve believed we need leaders because we’ve been brought up in hierarchical systems but in a culture that values what everyone has to contribute, leadership is a fluid thing. A lot of my so-called ‘leadership’ has been about encouraging and supporting other individuals and groups to take a lead in the areas they are passionate about, like Seonag who set up a whole branch of citizen science through her obsession with lichen or Rubha, an experienced mussel farmer, heading up the SeaCroft project with the guys from the seaweed factory. It’s been great seeing them blossom.”

She adds “As a group of tiny islands we’ve collectively taken the lead on living the net zero life and dealing with rising sea levels in our part of the world. Our forced independence has become a great strength. People have sought us out to learn how to do it – even though they had to be pretty determined to get here for a time! Many young people came and settled on land shared more equitably and we’ve welcomed climate refugees, all with something to contribute. Of course we were learning on the hoof, the old people with traditional knowledge were dying out (and they’d been living in a stable climate) but we learned all we could from them and I was able to bring much from my MacLeod and Mi’kmaq lineage.”

“Is this a return to the subsistence way of life of your ancestors, with all its privations?” I ask

“Less privation!” Anne exclaims “We’ve been inventive in so many ways and adapted smart technology to support a lifestyle that has some things in common with earlier times –like working

together and eating local food– but keeps us connected with the rest of the world. It makes so many things easier, sharing transport for instance or distributing intermittent power supplies. It was Indigo that did a lot of that work, she’s so smart! And really good at sharing her knowledge, so we’ve a thriving tech community here now.”

As well as her work in Uist, Anne was instrumental in setting up the Islands’ Consortium. A forum for small island nations worldwide to encourage and support each other, share strategies for dealing with the effects of climate change and have a collective voice.

“Do you remember the old environmental adage ‘think global, act local’ that was subverted for multinational interests?” She asks “Well this was us claiming back the global. It’s been brilliant, we’ve learned so much from each other, our South Pacific friends in particular, who’ve been dealing with this so much longer than we in the North have. It’s great being able to stand in solidarity with islanders all over the world.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll be retiring anytime soon” I suggest.

“Too right!” She laughs.

“So what are you working on now?” I ask

“Well Ursula and I are doing some online mentoring of group facilitators. It’s key, helping people to learn to work together, share leadership and resolve conflicts. And of course I’m still a practising herbalist, which I love. Uist has such an abundance of plant species, the *machair* in full bloom is a sight to behold! I’ve a busy wee practise with a couple of apprentices and we make our medicines from these wonderful gifts of nature. But I’m also really happy just watching the birds or the evening sky turn rosy pink. What a privilege to be here still!”

A privilege for us to have you too, Angelique MacLeod. Thank you!