In this dreamy, philosophical look at life explorer Bruce Parry (Tribe, BBC) travels the world in exploration of a deeper understanding of indigenous peoples and how their way of life can benefit those in the industrialised world.

Bruce Parry’s time living with indigenous peoples has given him a unique insight into the human condition and his time spent visiting places on the environmental frontline has allowed him a broad perspective of our place on the planet. From the forests of Borneo to the Saddhu of India on the Ganges; from the Amazon Jungle to the Isle of Skye, this poetic, thought-provoking documentary explores what might have changed within the human psyche since we stopped since we stopped roaming and began to settle. What can we learn from how nomadic tribes around the world live and how might this help us create more balanced ways of relating to each other and the natural world?

Tawai (the word the nomadic hunter-gatherers of Borneo use to describe their inner feeling of connection to nature) provides a powerful voice to indigenous peoples that demands be heard before it is completely lost.

“This interview by Terry Payne with Bruce Parry originally appeared on radiotimes.com on 22 Sept 2017.

It’s easy to write nice things about Bruce Parry. For a start, he’s blessed with a warm and cheery demeanour – you could imagine spending many happy hours in thrall to his storytelling about time spent with far-flung, isolated tribes. Tales of drinking animal blood, of getting stoned on herbal hallucinogens and that occasion when, with considerable determination, he embraced the custom of the Kombai of West Papua by attempting to invert his penis back into his groin. He failed, but ever so manfully. He’s impressively open, too, about his own past failings – including an addiction to sex and an emotional ambiguity towards women.

Journalists like nothing more than uncensored honesty and Parry provides that in spades. But it’s our failings – those of the wantonly greedy, consumerist West – that Parry wants to talk about, and even though it all sounds a bit too earnestly eco-evangelical, the former marine is just too likeable to dismiss as a head-in-the-clouds idealist.

“Do we think all progress is an upward development and everything’s just getting better all the time?” he ponders. “Or are there things we’ve lost along the way that it may be really wise to re-evaluate? Like the possibility that when you’re disrespectful to your environment, in time that will come back to you.”

These are the themes he explores in depth in his new film Tawai: a Voice from the Past. But before we consider that, let’s remind ourselves of 48-year-old Parry’s colourful TV past. Between 2005 and 2007 there were three series of Tribe, which saw him living with 15 different indigenous groups, earning him not just a Bafta but universal admiration for his digestive resolve.

Then came Amazon and after that Arctic, between which, a life based on what he describes as “excess stimulation” was challenged. “I’d moved to Ibiza in 2003 and was living a very hedonistic lifestyle. I was partying very hard. I’d come back from my trips away and be introduced to 20 people a day, being lauded and paraded and celebrated. I think I used the partying as a way of seeking refuge.”

But then I went to meet a group of people in Colombia called the Kogi who invited me to give up sex, drugs and alcohol. I realised my champagne had lost its fizz and I couldn’t carry on that lifestyle. The Kogi invited me to stop and reflect.”

Giving up drink and drugs, maybe, but sex? “I realised that sex had been my drive all my life. I’m not saying sex isn’t good but what I learnt during the process of giving it up was that it had actually complicated my relationships with the other sex. I was only about the sex, and not connecting. The sexual drives I had were coming from a needy place rather than a wholesome place.” In total, he was intentionally celibate for three years.

“It was a year and a half to begin with, then I had a relationship for a little time, then I did another year and a half. Giving sex up was a very complex and difficult thing. Loads of people still don’t understand it to this day.”

If sex looms large in Parry’s life then so, too, do drugs and rock n’ roll. At Glastonbury, while promoting his new film, he tweeted: “Right now, I just want to give a big shout out...
to Thom Yorke and Albert Hofmann. Bless you both xx.” Yorke is the frontman of the band Radiohead; Hofmann the “inventor” of LSD.

Was Parry stoned? “I can see where this interview is going,” he says, looking momentarily alarmed. “When it comes to hallucinogens we’ve done a very good job of putting them in the same bracket as all the other illicit material and substances, and there’s a reason for that because clearly they’re potent.

“But I’ve found, and still do find, them to be very beneficial in my own understanding of the world and, especially, my relationship with nature. I look forward to a time when we can see those things through a less fearful prism because the experiences I’ve had doing those things have been incredibly positive.”

By “those things” he refers specifically – though not exclusively one suspects – to ayahuasca and iboga, the jungle potion and plant that he took while on his travels. Does he really advocate them as a force for good?

“I’ve done ayahuasca a number of times and without question they’ve been some of the most potent, healing and enlightening experiences of my life. They’ve never been pleasant, and I’ve always gone through a very difficult time taking them, but afterwards there is this most extraordinary, beautiful sensation of being humbled.”

Humbled… and changed, perhaps? “Oh my God, I’ve had so many dramatic changes as a result. I’ve reconnected with my family in a deeper way. I hadn’t become estranged from them but I hadn’t paid them enough attention. And also with girlfriends. I remember causing all sorts of pain and convincing myself it wasn’t my responsibility but then being able to go back and say, ‘Look I’m aware it was me that did that and I’m really sorry.’”

Parry now has a new partner and has moved back to the UK. He is currently looking to buy some land in an isolated part of the country to start a new community with half a dozen willing families. You sense he’s trying to make a connection with the tribes from Borneo and the Amazon rainforest that feature in Tawai, which he spent the last four years making and is released in selected cinemas from Friday 22 September.

“I think the overriding invitation from the film is for us to think more deeply about where we’re at and how we’re going to create a future for our children – or not destroy a future for our children.”

Are children part of his future plans? “Not until I’m in a community. I’m very much married to this process. You hear it again and again, but it really does take a community to raise a child.”

A community without hierarchy? “I would love to explore what it’s really like to be in an egalitarian society where we see ourselves as part of nature and not above it. I do think it will be a difficult journey, but the other side of it is something incredibly beautiful and that’s why I’m willing to do it. As far as how that might be replicated around the country, that’s not for me to speculate.

“Even if it’s just shifting the awareness about what it is that makes us happy, and people asking, ‘So, here’s the guy that gave up the most amazing job we’d all die for, to live in a tent in a muddy field in Wales – but look, he’s laughing every day and he tells us he’s having a good time. Maybe he is, maybe he isn’t, but he’s doing it because he genuinely believes in it.’”