BNY Rise Up for Climate Justice Campaign: September to December 2015

By Lynda Schoenlkloth

December 2015 will be remembered as a significant time for the history of the world and the earth. Over 190 countries, from the U.S. and China to the small island nations, sat together in U.N. Paris Climate Talks (COP21) to develop an agreement about a global address to the increasingly dangerous climate crisis. The people of Western New York had been preparing for four months in this meeting through the Rise Up for Climate Justice Campaign, sponsoring and attending gatherings, rallies, vigils, films, presentations and a community fast. We knew how important these meetings were and we had sent our message to the world leaders demanding a just and sane agreement.

This campaign began in August 2015, as the Sierra Club Niagara Group was discussing the shift in the world’s imagination and actions on climate change. Pope Francis had released Laudato Si, On Care for our Common Home and its impact has been felt across the world. And the U.N. Climate Talks (COP21) were already in process with individual nations preparing their “Intended Nationally Determined Contribution” (INDC) that is, how much they would cut the emissions.

What could we do in Western New York to make people aware of the urgency of immediately addressing climate change? How could we reinforce a conversation in our area about the moral imperative to stop burning fossil fuels? How could we manage this energy transformation in a democratic manner? From these questions, the Rise up for Climate Justice Campaign was born.

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A recycling story

Recycling Corner: Is Recycling the Right Thing to Do?

By Ron Miscel

An article entitled “The Reign of Recycling” appeared in the NY Times in October, 2015. In essence, John Tierney, the author, suggested that much of the recycling we’ve been doing over the past 20-30 years has been a waste of time for the respective municipalities and may not have had the positive impact on the environment that we thought it did. It was further implied that a positive cost-benefit ratio does exist for recycling paper, cardboard and metal, but plastic might be better off dumped into a landfill or incinerated.

Undoubtedly, the article has generated significant controversy and rebuttal. To be fair, some of the points are legitimate, or at least worthy of further scrutiny. Likewise, so much is the rebuttal. Read both sides (posted on Sierra Club website under Sustainable Living/Recycle) and draw your own conclusions. However, here are a few summary points, worth considering.

Without recycling, it was believed that landfills would eventually take over significant amounts of US real estate. However, the actual projected landfill footprint is miniscule. And with proper layering, many landfills can eventually be covered over to create new green space, negating the argument. (While this isn’t the only reason we recycle, it is a good point made.)

Modern, large-scale trash incinerators burn more efficiently today than previously, and with substantially less polluting by-products than earlier versions. Is this a better option than recycling? The value of recycled plastic commodities fluctuates with economic trends. Today, there is a glut of oil in the world market and barrel prices are down. Since most plastics are made from oil or gas, at the moment it’s less expensive using the raw material to generate consumer goods than the recycled material equivalent. (Again, another good point but this consideration is variable.)

Measuring the true “carbon footprint” for a particular activity can be complicated. For example, it was suggested that rinsing a recyclable plastic container in hot tap water heated by coal-derived electricity, as required, could generate a greater carbon footprint than simply discarding it. (I can’t substantiate but there are often overlooked secondary considerations when calculating a carbon footprint.)

Assuming that at least a few of Mr. Tierney’s points are valid, the worst thing we can do is look at the recycling effort over the past years as wasteful, as implied in the article. We all did what we thought was the right thing based on the best evidence at the time. Here are two considerations.

If we discover a better way, why not embrace it? For example, if incinerating plastic is more cost effective than recycling, and has little environmental impact, then let’s do it. Instead of fretting over what we might have done, why not strive to reduce plastic consumption by taking a closer look at the goods we buy, including packaging, and decide what’s essential, what’s frivolous, and what alternatives are available to us. I’d like to think that the act of recycling has made us all pay more attention to our individual and collective environmental impact. For me, it was a first step toward reducing my carbon footprint and a springboard to activities like flipping off the light switch, turning down my thermostat, changing to Compact Fluorescent Bulbs (CFBs), shutting off and unplugging electronic devices and power supplies, buying recycled goods, and so on. In short, it helped me develop an environmental mindset.

Read the article and rebuttals online at the Sierra Club Niagara Group website. If there’s a better way, I’ll adopt it for. Let’s make the adjustments and move on. For example, a while ago most environmentalists believed ethanol fuel was a significant improvement to oil-based gasoline and a boon to the environment. It didn’t take too long, however, to realize that cutting down forests to grow corn was environmentally counterproductive. Trees, if you recall from high school biology, absorb carbon dioxide, the primary contributor to global warming. (Some calculate that 17% of global warming can be attributed to deforestation.) Even the Sierra Club can change direction. For a time, natural gas generated from hydro-fracking was viewed as a transitional fuel. Eventually, the true residual impact was known, and they now oppose it.

The best we can do is pay attention, be adaptable when we need to, to continue to put forth our best effort, and stay focused on the end goal – a better planet for all of us.

This is my last article for the Trailblazer newsletter. I thank all of my readers for considering the importance of recycling our waste and creating a better world to live in. Best wishes to everyone.
Sixth Extinction: A Rapid Disappearance of Wildlife on our Planet

By Alaina Zybolski

Growing up, had you ever given away stuffed animals and felt deep sadness the next day, once you realized you could never get them back? It probably didn’t take long to move on with your life knowing that there are other kids who like them. This is not the case with losing animal species in the wild, though. It is much tougher to resurrect African lions in the 26 countries from which they’ve disappeared than purchase a new plush lion at the toyshop. What for a few are the last vestiges of the sixth extinction, for many are the last wild animals over the past forty years, and the potential for us to lose 3 out of 4 species that we know today. This includes mammals, birds, fish, and reptiles. The good news is that we have time to take action so that younger generations can still smile at real critters in addition to the fuzzy ones sitting next to their pillows.

Scientists are sleuthing around the world to find out if our planet is truly in trouble and what we can do to stop a potential human-caused catastrophe. Previous mass extinctions have involved natural disasters, super volcanoes, and asteroid impacts (think: dinosaurs.) This time around, the human population has doubled since 1970, while the wild animal population has decreased by about 40%. Humans have strained food and water resources, interrupted natural waterways with water dams and continue to clear land for various activities including farming, energy, and material production. Animals are now in competition with humans due to suburban sprawl, habitat loss, overfishing, and many more human activities that are negatively impacting wildlife.

Sean B. Carroll, a biologist at the University of Wisconsin, points out “the potential losses of species are on a scale that is rivaled by only a few events in the last 500 million years of Earth’s history.” Even though volcanoes and asteroids are very different causes of mass annihilation, Carroll says, “the common denominator in all five previous mass extinctions was large and rapid environmental change on a global scale.”

Although animal populations would be dwindling without climate change, adding to the picture complicates things, on land and in water. Grizzly bears and red foxes have moved north due to warming temperatures. Sometimes grizzlies mate with polar bears and the hybrid animal is not adapted for either climate. The boreal, or Paris talks held on 11/30, contain a number of provisions that would lead to actions at the eve of the Climate Talks; and on 12/19, Report from Paris where we met with those from our community who attended the COP21 Paris Climate Talks briefing from New York last night.

Being hopeful is not to say the Paris Conference agreement is what we had hoped for, the agreement is not very enough as it does not meet the standards set by the former Kyoto Agreement. In fact, if all of the pledges agreed to by nations in Paris are met, the earth will still experience catastrophic climate change as it will not be enough to bring global warming to roughly 45 degrees F above preindustrial levels. This level of warming would result in injustice throughout the world today with the most vulnerable receiving the heaviest impact, leaving a devastated planet for our descendants. There are reasons there is no legal binding agreement is because it is known that the U.S. Congress would never sign such an agreement, a great sadness to all of us living in this country.

What is hopeful is that the Paris talks did not come to an agreement. They have already identified an aspirational goal of 1.5 degrees C above preindustrial levels; they agreed to a review country goals 5 years instead of 10. The US and France agreed to work on their approach to climate. They have established a framework for action, this is the good news.

These leaders tried and most of them engaged with a great sense of purpose. We are, as a species, realizing and this is to really understand the catastrophic impacts of global climate change, and we are also, perhaps, the last generation to do something about it. But the negotiators could not step out of their role as hardliners as it is understood that we, together, share this planet. There will be no winners if we don’t all win. So we, the people, must lead: we must create a massive, global climate justice movement so overwhelming that they cannot but act. This must be addressed at the international level but must work deeply into cities and regions. This is where most humans live, have the power to take action themselves, and the forum to impact our world. Countries like Buffalo Niagara can and should lead the way.

And our Climate Justice Pledge? We gathered over 2000 signatures from our community, 60 organizations, labor unions and churches, and thousands of individuals.

Put these names on a scroll that measured 42’ when opened. The scroll was carried by Paris by UB Law students, presented to Michael Brune, head of the Sierra Club in a small ceremony, and in turn, Brune delivered our pledge to John Kerry, Secretary of State of the United States. Our call to President Obama was taken to the talks and the voices of Western New Yorkers concerned with the necessity of immediate action on climate change and climate justice heard was.

The Rise Up for Climate Justice Campaign is over and U.S. Climate Change Talks in Paris as we speak. The work is just beginning. Join us as we initiate next steps in our local and regional communities to cut greenhouse gas emissions, increase ‘carbon negative’ actions, and to ensure that the climate justice movement is embedded in a just transition and promotes energy democracy.

The Transpacific Partnership Trade Agreement debunked

By Diane Czuczek

The Sierra Club has joined with labor unions, economic justice organizations, human rights organizations, and others to oppose President Obama’s proposed Transpacific Partnership Trade Agreement (TPP) because of the devastating impact the trade pact will have on workers, human rights, and efforts to stem climate change. A recent national phone conference hosted by the Sierra Club to mobilize efforts to defeat the TPP included over a million participants from across the country, many of whom had been working on the TPP for more than two years, including leaders in local and state Sierra Club chapters.

The proposed TPP includes 11 countries in the Pacific Rim and would cover 40% of the global economy. The agreement requires the member countries to abide by rules that cover many issues including labor, pharmaceuticals and the environment. It was negotiated in secrecy for 7 years with no public access except for the 700 corporations that had input into US draft negotiating papers including the oil and gas, defense, pharmaceutical and technology industries. Even Congressional access was limited to some Senators and Congress members who were permitted to view the documents in a closed room without removing copies. Until it was released last year, public knowledge about proposed terms was limited to leaks. The final document reveals who the TPP is intended to protect.

The TPP would give new rights to corporations to challenge environmental regulations that interfere with their expectations of profits. Under previous trade pacts like NAFTA corporations can sue the U.S. in unaccountable private tribunals over regulations. The TPP is the first trade agreement that extends that extraordinary right to allow U.S. companies to challenge U.S. laws in unaccountable private tribunals. It would roughly double the number of corporations that could sue the U.S. over environmental rules. Over 600 foreign investor courts have been made to the policies of 100 governments under current trade pacts including investor

If Congress approves the TPP, it could undermine much of the work the Sierra Club has been doing. It is expected to be introduced in Congress in February for an up or down vote later this year. If it passes, the Sierra Club is urging Congress to learn about the TPP and take action to oppose it, including contacting their Congressional representatives, writing letters to the editor, and joining in local efforts to educate and mobilize opposition. More information is available on the national Sierra Club website and at Public Citizen. http://www.sierra club.org/documents/analysis-tpp-text-november-2015.pdf