

The Trailblazer

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

By Lynda Schneekloth

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 for 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 region 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. *Are*

you for Climate Justice (RU4CJ)? The Niagara Group made a commitment to spend some of our limited funds to support this effort and developed some aspirational goals for the work we had set for ourselves.

We set out to raise awareness of the upcoming Paris Climate talks – a specific and time constrained objective. We organized public events for education and urged our elected leaders and institutions to push for ethical action from Washington. We used a "Climate Justice Pledge" to open the conversation and to give people an opportunity to take action about the Paris Climate Talks through collective and individual commitments. The Pledge had three aspects: We call on President Obama and the U.S. to lead the world in cutting greenhouse gas emissions; We call on our state and local leaders to take climate action through a just transition; and we call on each of us to take action on behalf of the Earth and future generations.

The three months leading up to the Paris talks were intense for members of our ExCom and the Climate Justice Coalition that emerged. We used the insights of the People's Climate March (9/14) and our own local experience to build a diverse and large coalition. We formed a strong relationship with faith groups and together

er helped organize the Interfaith Climate Justice Community. The Catholic sisters, within the Creation Care and Network of Religious Communities, were the leaders of this sector and together we began our campaign with a Prayer Vigil on September 1st, called by Pope Francis as the "World Day of Prayer for the Creation."

We contacted our brothers and sisters in labor and shared conversations about the ways in which this energy transformation was going to impact their working lives. The Western New York Environmental Alliance, a coalition of over 100 environmental groups, stepped up and agreed to use their annual Congress on the topic of Climate Justice. The coalition for social/economic justice groups — Partnership for the Public Good and Open Buffalo — worked with us and helped engage their members. And the University at Buffalo Law School played an important role through two seminars, including one in which students and faculty member, Jessica Owley, would actually travel to Paris for the talks.

One of our initial acts was to contact the City of Buffalo Common Council President, Darius Pridgen. We asked for and received a resolution on Climate Justice unanimously endorsed by all members. Council President Pridgen opened our first rally in front of City Hall in Niagara Square with a fiery talk on the necessity of 'justice' in action on climate change. The rally was held on September 24, 2015 in support of Pope Francis' U.S. visit and his address to Congress. Whenever possible

Continued on back page

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RECYCLING CORNER: *Is RECYCLING the Right Thing to Do?*

By Ron Missel

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 may not have been cost effective 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 land fill or incinerated.

Understandably, 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 is much of 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, with comments:

Without recycling, it was believed that landfills would eventually take over significant amounts of US real estate. However, the actual projected land-fill 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, a good point was 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 fluctu-

ates 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 is 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'm all for it. 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, 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 Zyhowski*

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 you helped make other kids smile. This may not be 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 I'm referring to is the 6th Extinction, the rapid loss of 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 asteroids. (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, overhunting, 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 com-

mon 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 it 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 cubs cannot camouflage in the arctic, nor do they have the ability to hunt in the woods. Red foxes are more aggressive, so arctic foxes are now in decline. Humans will be directly impacted by extinction of many species in the oceans caused by acidification. Acidification negatively affects marine life in many ways, especially the smallest organisms, plankton. Plankton are the food source for the entire chain of marine life, and the domino effect of diminishing numbers of plankton will eventually affect human food consumption as well.

When you consider that the earth is 4.5 billion years old, and humans have existed for only a few hundred thousand years, it better puts in context the idea that we have symbolically become the current day asteroid that has wiped out so much life in 40 years time. With the climate becoming more destabilized, we are only now becoming urgently aware of our need to change our lifestyles, appreciate our connectedness with nature, and understand that what we do to nature and the environment, we ultimately do to ourselves. Let us begin a new realization of the changes we need to make in order to slow the loss of life, from small steps of energy conservation to reducing purchases of material goods to using recyclable materials to taking walks instead of driving. What we do everyday impacts the world on a collective level. Show leadership by example and encourage family and friends to do the same.

The Transpacific Partnership Trade Agreement debunked

By *Diane Ciurzak*

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 the environment and efforts to slow climate change. A recent national phone conference hosted by the Sierra Club to mobilize efforts to defeat the TPP included a large number of 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 benefits...and it's *not* the environment.

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, foreign 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. policies in these tribunals. It would roughly double the number of corporations that could sue the U.S. over environmental rules. Over 600 foreign investor challenges have been made to the policies of 100 governments under current trade pacts including investor

challenges against Canada over a fracking moratorium in Quebec, against Germany over the phase-out of nuclear energy and against an environmental panel's decision to reject a mining project in Nova Scotia.

The pact contains no mention of climate change even though trade can be a contributor to negative carbon aspects of climate change, e.g. Malaysia exports palm oil, (a primary culprit of the Amazon deforestation and leading cause of animal extinction). Countries and corporations can use trade pacts to attack regulations controlling palm oil extraction or to attack green energy. The U.S. is planning to sue India for local content rules for renewable energy. The TPP contradicts the Paris Climate Agreement because countries and localities that adopt policies to enforce it could get sued under TPP by corporations that lose out. The TPP would also require the U.S. Department of Energy to automatically approve export of liquefied natural gas (LNG) which would lead to a huge incentive for new LNG export terminal development.

Despite President Obama's claim that the TPP protects the environment, the environmental chapter is very weak and is not expected to have much effect. It's even weaker than standards set by President Bush in earlier trade deals. Moreover, the U.S. has never brought a trade case against other countries for a violation of environmental protections in trade agreements, although they could have.

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, but it is far from a done deal. Sierrans are urged 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.citizen.org/documents/analysis-tpp-text-november-2015.pdf>.

"Annual Report" continued from front page

ble, we crafted our events to reinforce state and worldwide climate actions to involve our community in the global climate justice movement.

Between September 1 and December 19, 2015, seventeen different organizations of the coalition held events focused on climate justice: films, presentations and panel discussion, public hearings, hikes and bike rides, art showings and a "Party for the Climate." The RU4CJ coalition itself assumed responsibility for four major events: the Rise Up for Climate Justice Rally on September 24 with over 400 people attending; a 'thunderclap' on the October 10th Day of Action that reached over 73,000 people; The Gathering, a ritual gathering of over 200 people to speak to our concerns and hopes about the Paris talks held on 11/28 as a part of world 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 and heard their words of insight, and yes, hope.

Being hopeful is not to say the Paris Conference agreement is what we had hoped for; the agreement is not nearly enough as it doesn't even reach 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 only limit global warming to roughly 2.7 C (4.9 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. One of the 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 all the nations of the earth did come an agreement about action; they even identified an aspirational goal of 1.5 degrees C above preindustrial levels; they agreed to a review country goals in five years instead of ten, and agreed to annually report action toward their pledge. 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, after all, the first generation 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 heads of state to understand 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 leaders. Regions like Buffalo Niagara can and should lead the way.

And our Climate Justice Pledge? We gathered over 2000 signatures from our community, 60 organizations, unions and churches, and 20 elected officials. We put these names on a scroll that measured 42' when opened. The scroll was carried to 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 was heard.

The *Rise Up for Climate Justice Campaign* is over and the U.N. Climate Paris Talks are over. But the work is just beginning. Join us as we initiate next steps in our local and regional communities to cut greenhouse gas emissions, to increase 'carbon negative' actions, and to ensure that this energy transformation is embedded in a just transition and promotes energy democracy.

Stay involved – Get involved!

For more information, see niagarasierraclub.com; facebook.com/RiseUpforClimateJustice; [Twitter.com/RU4CJBuffalo](https://twitter.com/RU4CJBuffalo)

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