Divestment Movement Momentum for Western New York Higher Education Institutions

By Dave Reilly

Universities and colleges promise a “higher” education and the enlightenment of young minds through teaching that takes place both inside and outside of the classroom. Many purport to help develop the “whole student” through missions and visions that emphasize creating leaders, critical thinkers, active and engaged citizens and young ethical professionals who are concerned with social justice. With this framing, campaigns have been undertaken to encourage colleges and universities to look introspectively at their own policies, to recognize the inconsistencies of their own messages and practices, and to become vehicles of social change.

That is the essence of the fossil fuel divestment movement that has swept higher education since 2011. Across the country there have been growing demands that college and university administrations stop investing in fossil fuel industries and reinvest in environmentally and socially responsible alternatives. Sierra Club has been at the center of this effort, working with other organizations and building coalitions to challenge status quo practices.

The divestment statistics across all industries are impressive: according to Arabella Advisors, 436 institutions—Harvard’s is nearly $38 Billion, and the median college endowment is $59 million—so the effort to redirect their stocks, bonds, or investment funds away from companies that are unethical or morally ambiguous is more than a symbolic gesture. Such efforts can reduce the capital that is necessary for fossil fuel industries to thrive. Fossil fuel investments pose a risk to the planet, and as gofossilfree.org notes, “Breaking the sponsorship link between oil companies and universities will not bring justice where it is due, but by creating an informed public debate questioning the acceptability of associating these companies with our institutions, we strengthen attempts to hold the fossil fuel industry accountable in political and financial spheres.”

Now, the divestment movement is gaining traction in Western New York. Vanessa Dwyer, an undergraduate student at SUNY-Buffalo and student president of Canisius College and Niagara University faculty met in mid-October to coordinate plans for mission-based divestment strategies, building off the Catholic Climate Covenant, for the two schools. And they are following the lead of their students: Canisius undergraduates have already completed a preliminary sustainability report that encourages divestment, while Niagara University students are researching divestment options and reaching out to other WNY schools to build a critical mass of support.

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The one day symposium, which is open to all but is directed specifically to students, will include the following:

- General overview of divestment in higher education, with discussion about Native People and the Environment and the Responsible Endowment Coalition
- Mechanics of divestment with financial experts
- Reinvestment strategies, to move beyond the negative aspects of campaigns
- Student panels on organizing, coalition-build- ing, and effective planning

A major organizing initiative for these efforts will be the Divestment Symposium at SUNY’s College of Environmental Science and Forestry on November 18th. After successfully waging their own divestment campaign that has resulted in a commitment by ESF’s administration to completely divest from fossil fuel industries within five years, the organizers have moved on to the larger task of educating others within New York State about the importance of divestment. Alex Poisson, ESF’s Sustainability Coordinator and a Ph.D. candidate in Environmental Sciences, highlighted the NY Renews effort (to which Sierra Club is a signatory) as an example of how building coalitions and creating joint initiatives will increase the impact and power of all collective strategies, divestment included.

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Sierra Club Niagara Group
P.O. Box 1127
Williamsville, NY 14221-1127

For more news, archives, and upcoming events, visit...
NiagaraSierraClub.com

SEE IMPORTANT ELECTION BIOS AND BALLOTS ON PAGE 2!

Boreas Pond Adirondack Wilderness Threatened to Change Classification

By Larry Beahan

The Boreas Pond Tract is 20,000 acres of pristine Adirondack wilderness purchased by New York State for the Forest Preserve on May 10th 2016. The Adirondack Park Agency is beginning the process of its classification by holding a series of hearings across the State. Classification will determine how the public makes use of this marvelous forest.

Sierra Club’s Adirondack Committee, the Adirondack Mountain Club and other environmental and outdoor organizations believe it should receive the classification of “Wilderness.” That designation would deny access to motor vehicles except for a snowmobile trail along the Blue Ridge Highway. Local towns favor “Wild Forest” which would give motorized access to most of it, motor vehicles on trails, and not on foot trails. With climate changing, these large intact forests are crucial for their ability to take carbon out of the atmosphere and store it.

The Adirondack Park Agency will hold a hearing on the classification of the Boreas Pond Tract Monday November 28th (tentative date) at 7 pm in Rochester Institute of Technology’s Sustainability Hall. We urge you to join us in attending this meeting to advocate for “Wilderness Classification” and preserve the natural habitat for wildlife’s designated home.

For more information contact Dave at dreilly@niagara.edu

“Divestments” Continued from above

More information, including registration for the Divestment 2016: Setting a Path for a “Just Transition” symposium, can be found at http://www.esf.edu/outreach/divestment/. What makes this symposium particularly valuable is the opportunity to bring together students and academics with shared interests to determine how best to work collectively and on each individual campus. As Alex Poisson notes, “Because every campus and every campus culture is different—in academic mission and departments—being creative about what the global fossil fuel divestment campaign should mean on that specific campus and fitting that with the vision, mission, and identity of each campus is important for success.” Students from Canisius, Niagara University, and SUNY-Buffalo plan to attend and to build a Western New York network of advocacy for divestment from fossil fuel industries. Together they hope to become leaders for social justice and to apply the lessons from their work in the classroom to bring about real-world environmental change.

Dave Reilly is a Professor and Chair of Political Science, and the Director of International Studies at Niagara University. He serves as the president of Niagara’s faculty union, the moderator for the Black Student Union, and teaches Environmental Policy (among many other courses). He is on the Political Committee of the Sierra Club Niagara Chapter. Interested in starting a divestment campaign? Contact Dave at dreilly@niagara.edu.
The Trailblazer

October 2016

Elections 2016: Time to Vote!

As a member of the Sierra Club, you are asked to participate in two elections this fall. The first is our Niagara Group election of members of the Executive Committee – see information in this Trailblazer. The other election is for members At Large for the Atlantic Chapter (New York State) of the Sierra Club. Information will be available in the next issue of Sierra Atlantic, and also on the website: http://atlantic2.sierraclub.org

We ask for your considered participation!!!

Please read the following biographies of the candidates.

Laura Evans

Growing up in Western New York, I spent a lot of time outside falling in love with the natural world. This love fueled my environmental education and work over the last twenty years. I earned my B.A. at Cornell University in 2007 with a degree in Natural Resources, then moved to Austin, Texas to be an AmeriCorps Literacy tutor while applying to law school. I attended the University of Texas School of Law and took every environmental and administrative law course possible, edited the Texas Environmental Law Journal and worked in Alaska for Earthjustice, as an environmental law intern in 2010 and 2011. Currently, I am an environmental consultant, authoring environmental review documents for federal natural resource projects. I was a founding member of the Niagara Group’s Climate Justice Rally in September 2015 was my introduction to this group. I continue to be impressed with the Trailblazer’s Justice Campaign’s ability to bring many diverse groups of people together around the common goal of taking climate action.

I am deeply concerned about the environmental protection we have in place locally and globally. Overexploitation of natural resources, climate change, and pollution of all kinds. Although I am grateful for my legal background, I look to the Sierra Club to educate and advocate on behalf of the environment.

Laurence Beahan

I have been elected to the Board of Sierra Club’s Niagara Group quite a few times now. Over the years, I have served as Niagara Group Secretary, Vice Chair Group Chair, Conservation Chair, Group Delegate and Alternate Delegate to the Atlantic Chapter, as well as Delegate to the Niagara Relicensing Environmental Coalition. Over my long incumbency, our group has had lots of energetic new blood on the Niagara Group Board. New faces, new ideas, and new energy certainly, well as “externs” who have tenured members around who “remember where the bodies are buried”? When we start to reinvent the wheel, I remind the group how we did it last time, am familiar with many of the intricacies of National SC, and how our bylaws affect our operation.

As a current Conservation Chair, some of my work has focused on the preservation of Buffalo’s Outer Harbor as a natural and public park, humane standards for trapping on Grand Island, limitation of Natural Fuels Occupation of Albany State Park, blocking the water-way threats of the Northern Access Pipeline, promoted wind power on Niagara Counties Lake Ontario and obtained a Niagara Group Grant to monies to ensure they were actually spent on “Green” projects. In addition, I have written several books of fiction and non-fiction, and authored an essay in an Annual State Park and the Adirondacks and have maintained a longstanding interest in their conservation.

I would be very pleased to have another crack at it.

John Szalasny

I come from the silent majority in America – the population who cares about the environment and would like to see it preserved for future generations, but also feel under-qualiﬁed and overwhelmed by the issues. I have a passion to learn about what I need to save the polar bears and the Amazon rainforest (and everything else!). The issues are too global, and the environmental threats from big business interests too powerful for one voice to make a difference.

Hearing the fear that Al Gore & Bill McKibben, I knew I had to get involved. Before I became overwhelmed by the need to “Save The Planet”, I needed to sort out what my “Think Global – Act Local” plan would be. The issue that got me started was hydrofracking. I wrote a Letter to the Editor in the Utica Observer-Dispatch in 2010 on the potential bans of hydrofracking in NYS at that time. In addition, I joined the Amherst Against Fracking group. It took two years, but the Town of Amherst passed a local fracking ban which also banned, all fracking byproducts. Recently, I was appointed to Amherst’s Energy Conservation Citizens Advisory Committee where I hope to press the finalization of the town’s charter as a Climate Smart Community.

The Sierra Club Writer’s Group has been my primary activity in SCNG. I have taught and participate in the Buffalo News and the Amherst Bee on issues, including the Northern Access pipeline. Bong Bikes, and proposed a reuse of the Huntley Power Plant site as a solar park. Saving the planet might not be possible for one individual, but I hope to save one environmental issue at a time and would appreciate the opportunity to put my energy and ideas into effect through this very active WNY group.

Nicole Gerber

I grew up in Grand Island, NY and my favorite activities always involved being outdoors and exploring nature. As a 4th grader I participated in a project to plant bulbs in the schoolyard in the Erie County SPCA Hume Habitat yard in the Erie County SPCA, and our family have become strong supporters and advocates of the environment and wildlife. We participated in the People’s Climate March and initiated a campaign to eliminate sport hunting & trapping on Grand Island public lands. The Humane Society of the United States recruited us as WNY District Leaders based on the actions of the campaign. We have created permaculture gardens and butterfly, pollinator and bird gardens. We have ﬁelds with native milkweed, and registered that space as a 5 Acre Monarch Way. Our butterfly garden was featured in the 2016 Grand Island Garden Walk. We obtained certiﬁcation of our yard in the Erie County SPCA “Hume Habitat Program and continue to expand and create sustainable habitats and landscapes that protect the land and natural species.” Recently I obtained a NYSDEC Wildlife Rehabilitator License and will be volunteering as a wildlife intern with the Erie County SPCA.

My personal interests and passions are animals and the environment, I am interested in assisting the Sierra Club Niagara Group advance and implement the organization’s vital mission, with a primary focus to preserve and protect wildlife and habitats. Sierra Club Founder John Muir supported and defended equal rights of wildlife. He believed that wildlife had equal rights with humans that animals can teach us about wisdom and civility if we observe and appreciate them. The loss of habitats and ecosystems has increased due to man-made inﬂuences that include climate change, so it is critically important to promote education, increase awareness, and advocate on behalf of the wildlife and environment. Serving on the Executive Committee would assist SCNG incorporate the goals as envisioned and set forth many years ago by John Muir.

Ellen C. Banks

My ﬁrst environmental project was a high school paper on the pollution of the Mohawk River by General Electric. Girl Scout camp in the Adirondacks and rambling in the woods near home in Schenectady gave me a love of the outdoors. Being a working class kid in a middle class school environment brought awareness of social class inequality.

The SCNG Climate and Energy Committee was formed in 2000 and would later be afﬁliated with the Sierra Club. I am currently chairing this committee. With the Sierra Writers’ Group, I’ve published many letters to editors, op-eds, and a feature article on wind power in the Buffalo News.

Retiring from full-time employment in 2014 has permitted increased involvement in the Niagara Group, as an interim member of the Niagara Group Executive Committee, and a delegate to the Beyond Coal Campaign. I am a member of the Town of Amherst Conservation Advisory Council and a delegate to the Town’s zoning revision committee, active in the Foothills Trail Club, and enjoy hiking, camping and paddling, especially in the Adirondacks.

As climate change becomes apparent all around us, and even more intensely in coastal areas, it is imperative to build coalitions to leave all fossil fuels in the ground and to develop renewable energy. I’m encouraged by the emphasis on Climate Justice and the multi-faceted campaigns organized by the Town of Amherst, and the Niagara Group. I would like to continue my efforts to protect and conserve our environment well into the future.

Nominees for 2017-18 term on Niagara Group Executive Committee

IMPORTANT: Single Membership - Use one ballot. Joint Membership - Use both ballots. Ballots must be received by December 25, 2016

NIAGARA GROUP OFFICIAL BALLOTS

BALLOT 1 BOARD OF GOVERNANCE AT-LARGE DELEGATES CHOOSE UP TO 6 BOARD MEMBERS

Laura Evans

Bob Ciesielski

Laurence Beahan

Nicole Gerber

Ellen C. Banks

BALLOT 2 BOARD OF GOVERNANCE AT-LARGE DELEGATES CHOOSE UP TO 6 BOARD MEMBERS

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Poll Information:

To be eligible to vote, you must be a member in good standing with the Niagara Group as verified by a member’s mailing label. Please read all of the candidates’ statements on Page 2. Indicate your choices by checking the box next to the candidates’ names on the ballot. Each member may complete one ballot. Joint members may complete two ballots. Please detach this page and mail your ballot(s) to the address below in an ordinary letter-size envelope with proper postage. Send your ballots to:

2016 Niagara Group Elections Committee • Sierra Club Niagara Group • P. O. Box 1127 • Williamsville, NY 14221-1127

*Ballots must be received on or before 12/25/2016*