Activism as Practice
By Sara Schultz, Niagara Group Chair

It’s difficult to know what to say to everyone in this challenging time of the novel coronavirus. In normal times, I would have been reaching out to everyone to come to our annual awards dinner this spring. Alas, we will postpone our gathering for another day. I would have been bestowing much appreciation to our legislators and Governor Cuomo for making New York State an environmental leader for our country, virtual bookends of sustainability with California. Now I am appreciating the Governor’s leadership on securing our communities and setting directives that will bring a quick end to the spread of this deadly virus. Yesterday, my husband and I were on our way for our daily “self-care” hike. For a little diversion, we decided to go to Hunters Creek County Park near East Aurora. It is a glorious place to find respite and relieve anxiety. On the radio, Dick Van Dike started singing, “Put On a Happy Face”. Bye Bye Birdie profound? Well, yesterday it was. As many of us turn to the amazing concerts that artists are sharing on YouTube, practice self-care with online yoga, daily walks, cooking our favorite comfort foods and keeping in touch with loved ones, the word that comes to mind is resilience. I would think that Sierra Clubbers have a bit of an edge. So many of us take more joy from our natural surroundings than shopping malls and fancy restaurants. A bird, a favorite tree or a babbling brook can bring the greatest delight. Many of us are campers and backpackers where one can do so much with so little and be happy. Our activism gives us a connection to other volunteers, a family of people connected by what truly feeds the soul. The club’s leaders have been extraordinarily compassionate in response to what is really important in dark times, concern for each other. If you are working from home, with or without kids, probably the last thing you want to be doing is sitting at your computer more than necessary. However, there is a webinar opportunity to listen to one of the foremost experts on Solar Technology: Dr. Richard Perez from SUNY Albany. Two other experts, Lexie Hain and Lewis Fox, present on Agrivoltaics (grazing and beekeeping around solar installations). The information they provide is extremely comprehensive. NYUSES (NY United Solar Energy Supporters) provides a link to the recorded webinars on its website, www.useny.org. Surely the drastic reduction of air pollution in Italy and China during the period of economic shutdown proves the necessity to move away from dirty fuels as quickly as possible. That is why we will continue to pursue a sustainable and healthy economy for all. An article in The NY Times noted that predictions were that tens of thousands of lives were saved. An article in The NY Times noted that predictions were that tens of thousands of lives were saved. An article in The NY Times noted that predictions were that tens of thousands of lives were saved.

What’s Next for New York’s Climate Goals?
By Ellen Cardone Banks, Atlantic Chapter Conservation Chair

In 2019, New York State enacted the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, requiring reduction in greenhouse gases to 40% below 1990 levels by 2030 and 85% by 2050, and reduction of carbon emissions in the electric power generating sector to 70% by 2030 and 100% by 2040. Are we on track to meet these goals? Not yet. A major obstacle to de-carbonizing the electric power sector is the backlog of renewable energy projects waiting to clear the permitting process, known as Article10, which was devised for permitting fossil fuel plants. More than 25 utility-scale wind and solar projects are stalled in the Article 10 process, with only about 5 having been approved in the past 10 years. Several of the delayed projects are in the Niagara Group’s home base, spanning over eight WNY counties. During the oversight session that ended the abbreviated legislative budget process on April 3, the Accelerated Renewable Energy Growth and Community Benefit Act was passed by the legislature, signed by Governor Cuomo, and included in the 2021 budget. Creative voting methods were devised to protect the health of the Assembly and Senate members while they voted for the budget.

A new Office of Renewable Energy Siting will establish uniform standards for environmental impacts, require a net conservation benefit for endangered and threatened species, implement a species mitigation fund, and standardize procedures for community input, while still allowing for modified regulations as needed for local conditions. Presently, many of these aspects have to be designed separately for each project and submitted to different agencies that do not communicate well among themselves. Contrary to some anti-renewable commentary, local input and regulations will be taken into account but cannot be “unduly burdensome,” a provision that is already in the modified regulations as needed for local conditions.
Are We Ready for a “Homegrown National Park”?  

By Lynda Schaeferloth

Americans love our national parks—327.5 million visits in 2019 alone. We know that this is deep love by our willingness to fund national parks through public monies that the money that all of us contribute to the well-being of our shared world. These parks are jewels on our land, protecting habitats across the range of our national bio- mes. For all their protection of habitat and species, we know that they are endangered today not only by too many visitors, but also by climate change and the biodiversity crisis. These pressures are exacer- bated by the fact that these 598 parks are ‘green spots’ on the land: isolated- ed islands in the midst of our human habitat, unable to provide their full potential of ecological function and endangered by invasive species.

We know that when European settlers arrived on these shores, that the land ‘from sea to shining sea’ was the equivalent of an enormous national park that we have been transforming ever since by building human habitats over the landscape. We have reached the point that today our infrastructure is so vast that there are at least 2000 tons of infra- structure of every human being (Britton-Pagdy in Sierra, March/April 2020)! Given this condition, how might we repair the landscape so that it can provide good homes for those species, plants and animals that are forced to live in degraded homes and are now endangered?

Doug Tallamy in his new book, Nature’s Best Hope (2019), puts forward an idea that is nested in our love of parks: A Homegrown National Park. This park criss- crossed the nation through lawns and corpo- rate headquarters, municipal parks, shopping malls and farms. Yes, through your lawn and place of work! This Homegrown National Park provides food, shelter and reproduction opportunities for pollina- tors and other insects, helps manage our water- sheds, builds soil, and sequesters carbon.

There are three requirements for becoming a part of the new Homegrown National Park: less lawn, more plants in total that are planted in (mostly native) communities, and “more of those plants will be the powerhouse species that drive food webs and support pollinators” (Tallamy, p. 200). Imagine the monarch butterfly moving through our communities with thousands of places to stop and be refreshed and to deposit its eggs; birds with suffi- cient winter food; natural insect predators in our gardens so there is no need to apply toxic sub- stances and poisons. Imagine how we could con- tribute to the wellbeing of the earth, and the delight in our children’s eyes when they experience the world of interactive nature in their neighborhood and at home. We can do this!

If you’re just beginning to think about garden- ing differently or thinking of joining the Homegrown National Park movement, we urge you to check in on “In the Garden,” Laurie Ousley’s blog at “in-the-garden.blog.”

New york’s Climate Goals” continued from front page  

Article 10 rules. Wildlife protections will be increased, not overturned. While we still need more wind and solar energy around the world, there is a growing body of evidence that utility-scale wind and solar energy projects are not harmful to human health or property values. Renewable energy has a vast net benefit to birds and other wildlife, as the toxic effects of mining and burning fossil fuel far outweigh any damage from construction and opera- tion of wind and solar power. Community benefits will be required, including reduced utility rates for municipalities hosting projects.

The state will also prepare sites and fast-track permitting for renewable energy projects on brown- fields and abandoned commercial properties. The new law provides for study and improvement in the power grid so that electricity production can be more evenly distributed throughout the state. Most importantly, decisions on applications will be required within one year for most applications and six months for repurposed industrial sites.

Releasing the stalled energy projects and incentivizing developers to plan more will go a long way to meeting decarbonizing goals, protect- ing our air, water, wildlife and human health, and creating good jobs, especially in rural areas that badly need them.

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