

Sierra Club Keynote Speech Climate Action Conference December 2015

By Shenna Bellows

Thank you each one of you for taking a precious Saturday to be here today. You are change makers. You are the activists who are creating a better tomorrow for our children and our grandchildren.

I woke up this morning and checked online and on Twitter to find out what's happening in Paris. We're going to hear more at noontime of course from Sierra Club members – Mainers – who are there representing all of us. In Paris this morning people are marching in protest, wearing red, to say that there are climate red lines that can't be crossed. Looking at the beautiful pictures of people in red standing up for all of us and for humanity, I decided to wear red today in solidarity. This took me back the last time I wore red for a cause, which was when Mainers gathered in Augusta in 2009 for the first public hearing about marriage equality, and the Civic Center became a sea of red as supporters filled the room, dramatically overwhelming opponents. We know how that story ends. We won the day but lost the referendum in 2009. Our loss made some feel despair. Yet, love won out in the end. In 2012, we reversed that loss and became one of the first states to pass marriage via referendum, and our efforts sparked a movement nationwide that now seems inevitable. Love won, but it wasn't love alone. It was love backed by the commitment of activists who refused to give up in the face of opposition and apathy, activists who refused to take "no" or "wait" for an answer. And that's what each of us is doing today in solidarity with the activists who are marching for redlines in Paris.

The longest night of the year is fast approaching. We are living in a dark time quite literally, but we're also living in a dark time metaphorically. 54% of people globally recognize that climate change is a serious problem and 51% of people globally realize that climate change is harming people now. In the US we're not quite at a majority. Only 45% of US citizens recognize that climate change is a serious problem and only 41% of Americans believe it is harming people now. In this room, it's probably quite different. Raise your hand if you believe climate change is a problem. Raise your hand if you believe climate change is harming people now. We are the 54%.

But there's a conundrum described eloquently by The Nation magazine last spring. To quote Michelle Goldberg of The Nation, "Without hope, the horror of climate change paralyzes rather than politicizes." She goes on to say, "There is a brutal conundrum at the heart of the fight against catastrophic climate change: when people grasp just how dire things are, they're as likely to hunker down as to rise up. Maybe more like."

As more and more people realize that climate change is real and it's harming people now, there is a greater sense of collective despair. When you add to those realities the other realities of our day to day – racism and xenophobia on the rise, gun violence, income inequality, attacks on women – these times – our times – seem very dark indeed.

But you, each one of you in this room, are the light. Positive change is coming – positive systemic change – and it’s not top down. It’s bottom up. It’s grassroots. It’s you. One year ago, many of us met at Bowdoin College. The focus was grassroots action. The question was, “In the wake of the 2014 election which saw the re-election of a Governor in our state who is hostile to environmental issues, what can we do to make a difference?” One year ago, we talked about solar – and community solar. We talked about community gardens. We talked about transportation policy and the expansion of passenger rail from Lewiston to Auburn. We heard from some of the experts like Revision Energy who are back again with us today. But the great thing about Sierra Club – one of my favorite things about Sierra Club – is that this organization does far more than just talk. We act. So one year ago, Sierra Club Maine launched the Maine Climate Action Team program. How many of you are members of your local climate action teams? Please raise your hands. That’s so cool. There are now active climate action teams in:

- Freeport
- Porter, Brownfield, Parsonsfield, Cornish, Hiram, Baldwin
- Belfast
- Buxton
- Portland
- Kennebunk
- Wiscasset
- Brunswick
- Phippsburg

In one year, we’ve gone from one solar farm project to four. Portland is on the verge of having the first massive solar project sited on top of a closed landfill in the state. We have moved from talk to action on solar in a big way. Towns across the state are adopting or considering plastic bag bans and fees. And it was a privilege to work with Tony Donovan and Sierra Club to pass an appropriation to plan for expansion of passenger rail from Portland to Lewiston/Auburn, overcoming the objections of Governor LePage, to move forward on a visionary public transportation project that would connect Maine’s two largest cities.

To prepare for today, I skimmed back over Sierra Club Maine Chapter’s news clips from the past year, and those clips gave me so much hope. Not only are you – the members of Sierra Club Maine – taking action at the local level, but you’re getting noticed.

January: [“Ocean acidification bill wins broad public support,” Boothbay Register, 1/13/14.](#)

February: “Keystone XL Pipeline protestors rally in Portland,” WCSH6 TV, 2/4/14.

March ["Passenger rail bill for Lewiston-Auburn chugs forward at State House," Lewiston Sun Journal, March 17, 2015.](#)

April [Will Portland's bag fees, polystyrene ban make a difference?", Bangor Daily News, April 9, 2015](#)

May: ["Environmentalists Protest 'Dirty Fuel'", Maine Public Radio, May 16, 2015.](#)

June: ["Coalition pushes Maine lawmakers for passenger rail expansion," Portland Press Herald. June 2, 2015.](#)

July ["Climate Action Teams deliver solar - and people – power," Coastal Journal, July 22, 2015](#)

August ["EPA Clean Power Plan elicits opposition, support," Portland Phoenix, August 5, 2015.](#)

September ["Searsport dredging proposal faces stiff headwind," Portland Press Herald, September 6, 2015.](#)

October's headline ["Plastic bag bans and fees catching on in Maine" Portland Press Herald, October 11, 2015.](#)

November: [Mainers Preparing for UN Climate Change Conference," Maine Public Radio, November 23, 2015.](#)

December ["Solar power advocates rally while task force ponders Maine-policy," Portland Press Herald, December 9, 2015.](#)

These news clips demonstrate your amazing actions and your progress over the last year. It's remarkable. What you're doing is so important for three reasons:

1. **You are demonstrating that success is achievable, and it is actionable.** This is a concrete, measurable way to reduce emissions and preserve the planet. We need to see success – to break down this problem into actionable and measurable steps. It's sort of like a new system my mother-in-law has adopted to clean her house. Taking on the whole house all at once seemed overwhelming, so she's doing a small piece at a time. Otherwise, it seems too big and too overwhelming. That's what your actions are doing for people in our communities. Do we in this room right now have the power to reduce global emissions or force the leaders in Paris to issue a meaningful deal? Not yet. But can we reduce emissions in our town and by extension in Maine and by extension in the country? Yes. And for better or worse, measuring greenhouse gas emissions is like accounting. We can capture that data, so we can know for example that solar energy already installed by May of 2014 already reduces our greenhouse gas emissions collectively in this country

by 16.8 million metric tons of CO2 per year. These actions, these projects, are measurable, and in a small but concrete and cumulative way, these actions are confronting climate change directly.

2. **The second reason that what you're doing is so important, is that You are creating the political will for broader change.** Too often whether on climate or any other serious issue, it is true, that politicians don't lead, but people do. Local action creates the political will for state, national and international action. We have seen this time and time again. It was certainly true in the marriage equality movement in Maine and nationally. In 2014, it seemed like a wave as politician after politician endorsed marriage equality. Well, by 2014, the people had already spoken. There is no doubt in my mind that today's climate change deniers can be persuaded that climate change is a crisis but a solvable crisis.
3. **You are creating cultural change.** Local action creates cultural change that is necessary to scale up to have the dramatic shifts that we need. Cultural change is very difficult to measure. In part, it is reflected in opinion surveys that show a steady rise in the number of Americans and people worldwide who recognize the threat of climate change to future generations. But it is cultural change that drives lasting political change.

Today you give me joy. To reflect upon the past year, to look at the news clips from Sierra Club, to think about the future you are building for the next generation, you are the hope – the light – in these dark times. It's a choice. You could have been anywhere else today – home hunkering down – but you are choosing action. We know from the achievements of the past year that these actions are beginning to take off, to create measurable improvements at the local level, to inspire politicians in Augusta to want to do more and creating cultural change that is leading towns to adopt systemic changes themselves. You are changing the world, and on behalf of your children and grandchildren, I thank you.