



Fresh Air

The Quarterly Newsletter of the Mid-Hudson Group of the Atlantic Chapter

Spring 2021 | Vol. 53 | Issue 1
This newsletter will be posted to our website along with all previous newsletters.

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Chair's Corner by Lalita Malik

After the November elections I was talking to my son about the progress the new administration will make towards combating global warming by reducing use of fossil fuels and promoting renewable energy, resulting in an environment with cleaner air and water. His response? "Mom, President Biden has four years to make changes and then the next administration will come in and undo whatever progress we make".

That made me pause and think. Is that what has been happening? I realized that it has. During President Obama's presidency we saw growth of renewable energy, shuttering of coal and fossil fuel plants, improved fuel efficiency of motor vehicles and an increase in Electric Vehicles. Air and water quality improved and more land was protected, which reduced our use of energy, adding savings to our pockets. We saw an increase in home solar installations, development of community solar farms and new wind turbine installations.

Over the last four years we saw the EPA gutted, environment protections removed and support for fossil fuel industries increase. But despite that, the growth in the production of renewable energy, production of fuel-efficient vehicles, and Electric Vehicles (EVs) continued. Technical advancements continued to progress. The momentum we had built up over the previous 8 years carried us forward. Once consumers experienced a better life, they were not willing to give it up.

Now this country is in a tug of war. There are three segments of the population. The environmentalists who believe in science and the improvements in our quality and quantity of life that this knowledge brings. Science has brought us automobiles, home heating and cooling capabilities, home appliances, telephones, TVs, medical advancements, etc. It has made our life easier, healthier, and given us more leisure time. We believe in preserving our natural resources, land, open spaces, clean water and air and a life free from diseases. When we encounter problems, we invent solutions. We are the progressives that work hard, invent and improve the world.

Then there is the segment that does not believe in science, do not accept responsibility for their actions, do not want change, love fossil fuels, but they do want the benefits and comforts the scientists create. Unfortunately, they have politicized progress and for every step forward that we take, they try to yank us back towards the swamps, under the guise of freedom. Alison White has an interesting perspective about environmental policies in the past and what we need to do to keep us moving forward in her article titled "What Should Environmental Policy Look Like Tomorrow?"

The third segment has "a laissez-faire" attitude about life. They do not seek out information or engage in discourse outside their cocoon. When a calamity occurs, they are flabbergasted. How could this happen? Check out Nivo Rovedo's article about the fiasco in Texas, and titled "A Cautionary Tale of Power, Climate Change, Money, Independence, and Disaster".

Four years. We have four years to build the foundation that can sustain us through the next downturn. We can win this tug of war by engaging the third segment through education and showing them the lifestyle benefits of saving the environment. Our Conservation Chair, Nancy Severns, has started hosting Zoom meetings to discuss current, local environmental issues the Mid-Hudson Group is working on and invites you to participate and add topics to our list. Check out her "Conservation Corner" article to learn more and find out how you can help.

Are you a tree hugger? I am. Check out the book review by Sarah Kennedy about "The Man Who Planted Trees". Then plant a tree to replace one destroyed somewhere on this earth by actions of thoughtless humans. Do this with your children, grandchildren and neighbors for Earth Day and send us a picture with a writeup of your experience for our next newsletter.

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Conservation Corner

Mid-Hudson Group Conservation Committee

by Nancy Severns

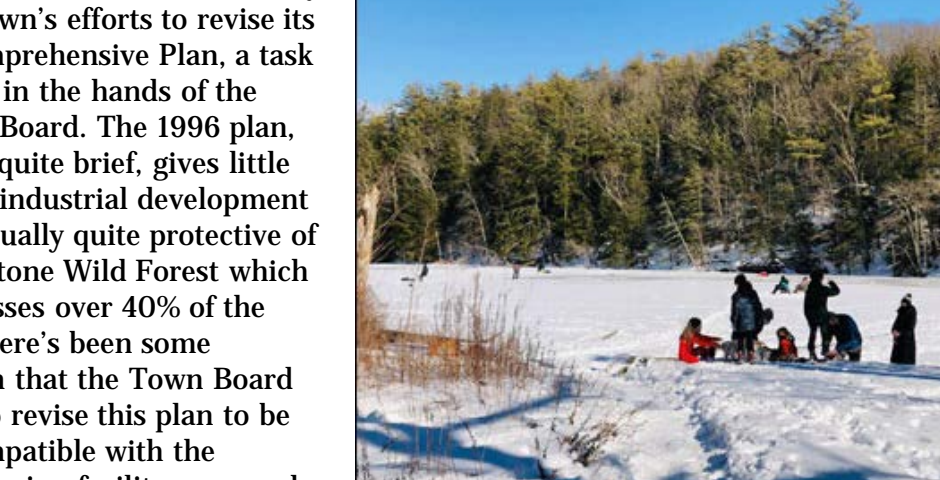
Two of the primary goals of our Mid-Hudson Conservation Committee are to:

- Maintain liaisons with government agencies and non-government organizations in the Hudson Valley in order to advocate for the preservation of natural resources and environmental sustainability.
- Help our activists, local communities, and allies win on the environmental issues most important to them. We engage in strategic alliances on broader issues if this can help further environmental causes and remain consistent with our values.

We have prioritized three local issues for our current involvement.

Bluestone Wild Forest (BWF, Kingston, NY)

BWF is a remote 3,000-acre state land preserve available for hiking, skiing, camping, fishing, and water sports. It contains Onteora Lake and Pickeral Pond. A steel and concrete slab fabrication plant is proposed at 850 Route 28, adjacent to Pickeral Pond and completely surrounded by BWF. Allied groups are asking the town of Kingston to review the full environmental impact and assess the impacts to recreational activities, tourist economy, habitat, wildlife, water, and air quality.

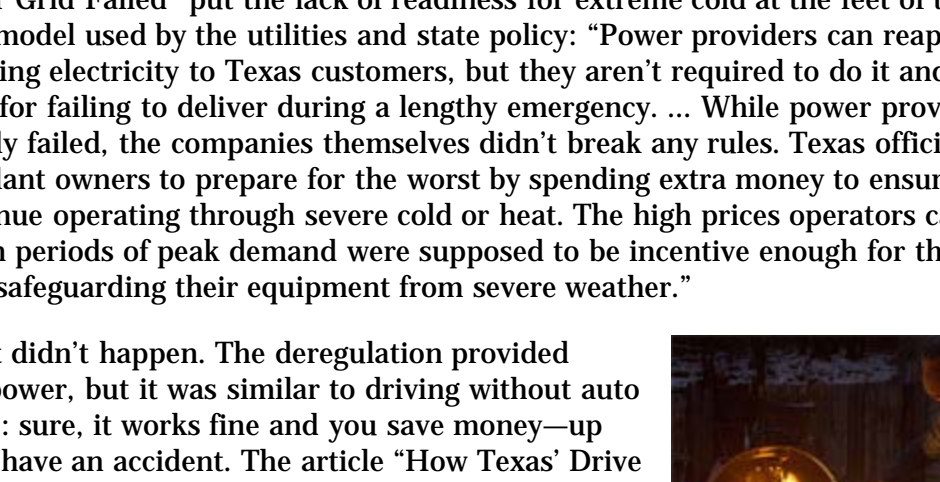


Danskammer Energy, Newburgh, NY

Danskammer Energy Company has filed its Article 10 application to build a new gas-fired power plant on the site of the existing Danskammer plant on River Road in the Town of Newburgh. (Article 10 is the New York state regulation that governs the permitting process for major electric generating facilities). The new plant would run full-time, replacing the current plant which only runs occasionally. The New York State Siting Board has deemed Danskammer's application deficient twice because it contains insufficient information to demonstrate the project's consistency with New York's Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA).

In November 2020, Danskammer filed a supplement to their application in which it claims to demonstrate how it will fulfill the requirements of the CLCPA by converting the plant to either hydrogen fuel or "renewable" natural gas (RNG) in the future. In January 2021, a Motion to Strike was filed by the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater organization, Riverkeeper, Scenic Hudson and the Sierra Club, stating that Danskammer's Application and the supplements do not comply with the CLCPA (see our [Winter 2020 newsletter](#) for more on Danskammer's claims regarding hydrogen and RNG). Despite our Motion to Strike, in February 2021 the Siting Board issued a letter to Danskammer Energy, stating that the application is complete and complies with Public Service Law.

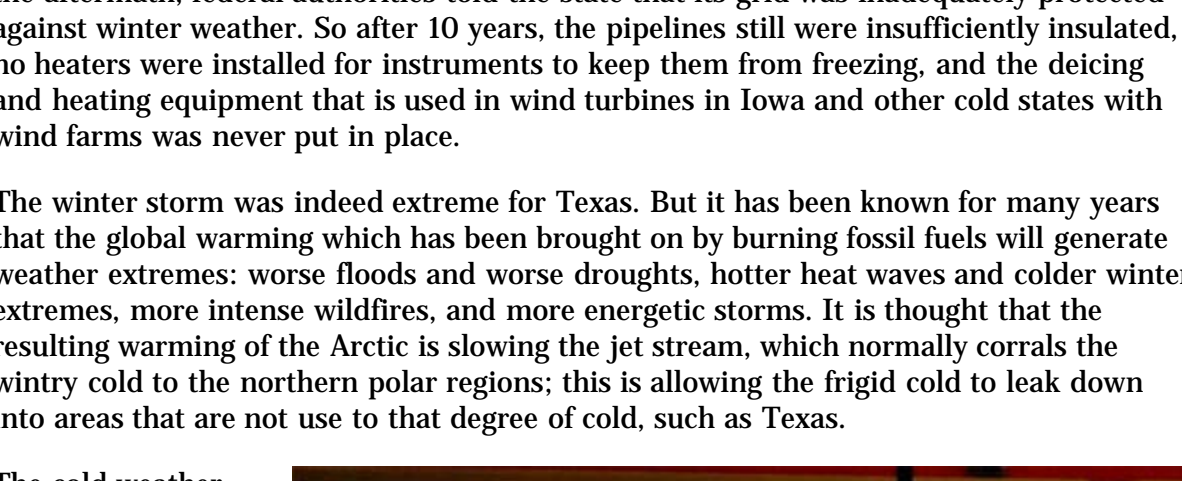
With the application deemed complete the next step is the Article 10 permitting process which lasts for 12 months. During this time trial-type evidentiary hearings will be held, along with opportunities for public comments. The first public hearing, which will be virtual, is on March 31st. You can help prevent this unnecessary fracked-gas plant from moving forward by making your voice heard. The Stop Danskammer Coalition, of which Sierra Club is a member along with Scenic Hudson, Riverkeeper, NYPIRG, Clearwater and many others, will host an **update and training session on March 23rd**. [Sign up for the training session here](#) to learn about the application process, how to give virtual public testimony, and hear about talking points. In order to stop the Danskammer project going forward we must demonstrate to the Siting Board and Governor Cuomo that New Yorkers are strongly opposed to the plant.



Danskammer Energy River Road facility

Wheaton Park, Pelton Mansion, Poughkeepsie, NY

Wheaton Park is a neighborhood park containing Pelton Mansion near the Poughkeepsie train station and on the Register of Historical Places. Its sale to developers was approved by the Common Council five years ago but the contract was never approved. The city's Historic District and Landmark Preservation Commission (HDLPC) recommended against execution of the contract due to the site's historic value and views. The recommendation was upheld by the Common Council in October 2020. In February 2021 the developers filed a lawsuit against the City, the Common Council, and the Historic District and Landmark Preservation Commission.



Another aspect of our committee's mission is education. We look to educate the public and our members on these projects and conservation in general. Look for future Mid-Hudson Sierra Club outreach seminars.

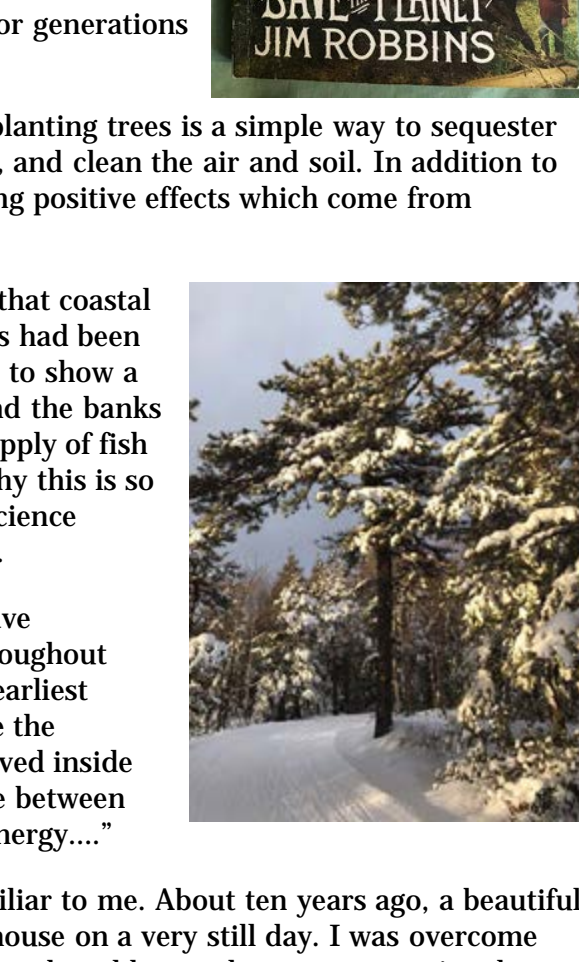
The Conservation committee meets every other month on the third Thursday of the month at 5:30 pm via Zoom. We will discuss the four topics above (Bluestone Wild Forest, Danskammer, Wheaton Park, and Education) and will be open to hearing about other conservation issues on which we could work. If you'd like to join the meeting, send an email to Nancy Severns via midhudsonsierragroup@twc.com. Our next meetings are April 15th and June 17th at 5:30 pm so get your taxes done early and join us!

What Should Environmental Policy Look Like Tomorrow?

By Alison White

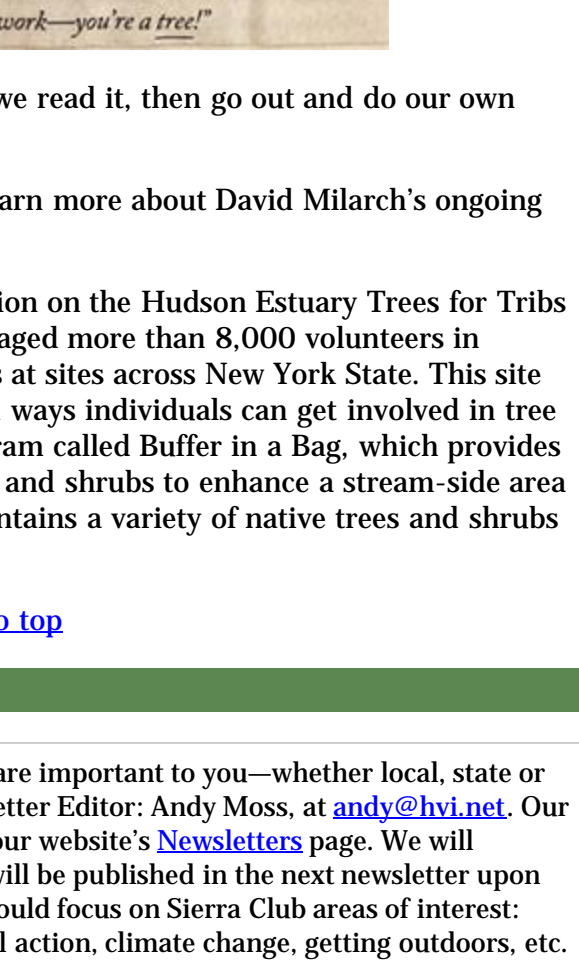
With a new President in the White House who seems intent on listening to scientists and addressing climate change, and who has appointed an impressive team of climate change advisors, I started thinking about environmental policy. What works, what doesn't, and how might environmental policies change in the coming years?

In the twenty-first century we take for granted the existence of federal laws aimed at reducing air and water pollution. After the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970, Congress passed two of our most far-reaching federal environmental laws: the Clean Air Act of 1970 and the Federal Water Pollution Act of 1972. Under these two laws, the EPA issued regulations that have produced dramatic environmental improvements. Many dirty waters have become swimmable, fishable and drinkable again (witness our own Hudson River). The war on air pollution has decreased smog, even in places like Los Angeles, and some waste dumps have been reclaimed while others have been safely contained.



Regulations have an important place in protecting the environment. They also have some downsides. Companies complain about the high cost of compliance, which can in fact be considerable, and these costs create resentment in the business community. Environmental regulations have become so contentious that it's automatically assumed any important regulation will end up in court. This litigiousness increases costs and aggravation for everyone involved. Even though a majority of Americans agree on the need for clean air and water, environmental regulation has become politicized, making rational conversations difficult.

Many environmental improvements resulted from regulations that address pollution originating from specific sources such as cars and factories. For example, following emissions regulations, new engine designs for cars and scrubbers for factory smokestack discharge emerged. But pollution whose source can be pinpointed easily and for which technological fixes can be designed are a bit like low-hanging fruit. Environmental degradations whose sources are diffuse or indirect are more difficult to address. The recent court action over whether the Clean Water Act covers groundwater pollution exemplifies this.



Contamination from large poultry farms and from homeowners dousing their lawns with pesticides are examples of the problem. These less localizable systems of pollution call for strategies that combine creative new technologies along with broad participation and behavioral changes by everyone.

Adding to the picture, climate change is an existential problem that spans national boundaries and regulatory structures. Incentive mechanisms such as subsidies and tax breaks for solar panels and electric cars have proven effective for moving towards a carbon-free world. Emissions trading uses a market-based approach to reducing emissions by letting companies buy and sell the right to produce pollutants. But it is limited to pollutants for which markets can be established, and that companies and nations then participate in. While market mechanisms combined with regulations are part of the strategy for combating climate change and environmental degradation, they are insufficient to achieve those goals, as is relying on a single agency like the EPA to set policy. Participation at all levels of government and society is required, and all stakeholders—governments, companies and citizens—must act in partnership.

One idea that has been proposed involves state and federal partnerships, in which performance targets are established by the federal government and the states are responsible for designing and implementing environmental management systems to meet the targets. This strategy would require among other things, creating the methodologies for measuring compliance. If a performance-based approach requiring state implementation of federal standards just becomes a way of turning over more decisions to private industry, it will fail. The difficult task in this approach is justifying the confidence of everyone—companies, environmental groups, neighborhood associations, state regulators, the EPA—in the process and its decisions, and ensuring competent and trustworthy compliance measurement.

Other strategies might include things like taking a fresh look at how regulations are structured. Today, regulations target a particular area such as water, air or soil. Alternatively, the focus of regulation could be industry-based, where companies would need to comply with requirements presented under one regulatory umbrella covering all environmental questions pertinent to the industry in all its possible environmental settings. One inspector or board of inspectors would be responsible to ascertain compliance, rather than having a parade of inspectors from different organizations visiting the facilities.

Beyond addressing the creation of pollutants, the global public's economic demands that drive their production need to be modified. The standard of living expected by the people of the developed world has been known for decades to be unsustainable, and those expectations are now spreading to emergent economies as well. Citizen behavior needs to be incentivized and regulated to support heating, eating, traveling and working that reduce consumption and waste, rather than contributing to environmental degradation.

The need to improve the environment and fight climate change is inescapable. So far regulation, incentives and market-driven strategies have been used, and with success. But complex and broad-based problems remain, and we will need to expand the set of tools used to alleviate them. The goal should be to reduce everyone's costs, lower the political heat, and improve results. It requires designing new approaches and technologies, but also tackling tough societal, governmental and political problems: we must work to build trust, consensus and partnerships among government, citizens, companies and interest groups. A renewed commitment to science-based environmental policy by the new administration coupled with a willingness to consider unconventional approaches may take us a long way in fighting climate change and environmental problems.

Update:

Town Planning Process may Diminish Protections for Bluestone Wild Forest

By Marie Caruso

Little has been heard from the developer of 850 Route 28, LLC (the proposed concrete and steel manufacturing plant in the midst of the Bluestone Wild Forest) since his archaeological consultant sent a letter several months ago objecting to the inclusion of the site in a National Historic Bluestone Quarry District being considered by the State Office of Historic Preservation. The developer, Thomas Auringer, has not yet made any response to the damaging noise impact studies submitted to the Town of Kingston Planning Board last June, as well as previous studies documenting the proposed development's harmful impacts upon the forest's natural resources and recreational values. He has given no indication that he plans to abandon the project and has continued to use the site as a storage area for construction materials, cranes, and other heavy equipment.

More troublesome, however, may be the Town's efforts to revise its 1996 Comprehensive Plan, a task presently in the hands of the Planning Board. The 1996 plan, although quite brief, gives little room for industrial development and is actually quite protective of the Bluestone Wild Forest which encompasses over 40% of the Town. There's been some indication that the Town Board may try to revise this plan to be more compatible with the manufacturing facility proposed for 850 Route 28.

Winter activities on BWF's Onteora Lake, 1/4 mile from proposed concrete plant

Catskill Mountainkeeper and the Woodstock Land Conservancy are actively seeking individuals who could help inform the Town about the process of crafting a Comprehensive Plan which is protective of the Town's significant natural and historical features. Anyone with any knowledge or expertise in this area is urged to contact Kathy Nolan at kathy@catskillmountainkeeper.org or Maxanne Resnick at maxanne.wlc@gmail.com.

Stay tuned. Although the planning board has not required the developer to submit an Environmental Impact Statement, they have promised to hold a public hearing before any permits are issued for this project and will likely hold one regarding any revisions to the Town's Comprehensive Plan as well. For up-to-date information on this issue, see the website saveonteoralake.org, or sign up for regular updates at: bluestoneforest@gmail.com.

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Energy Corner by Nivo Rovedo

A Cautionary Tale of Power, Climate Change, Money, Independence, and Disaster

Well, 2021 has opened up with some new horrors for our nation. The January 6 insurrection that sought to overturn a free, fair, honest election left most people aghast and shocked that such a catastrophe could occur in the Capitol of the USA; it was (and continues to be) frightening and infuriating. Worse, it was based on lies and belief in really insane conspiracy theories. How did that happen?

And now another disaster has left the State of Texas reeling: the failure of the Texas electric grid in the face of an unusual sub-freezing weather. How did that happen? Those folks in Texas were left without electricity, gas, so no heat, no water, no light, and little food, with temperatures in the single digits. Pipes froze and ruptured, and with the return of more normal, above-freezing temperatures, the burst pipes resulted in flooding of homes and streets, causing low water pressure and requiring folks to boil water (if they have water service at all).

Sadly, many lives were lost to the cold and carbon monoxide poisoning that resulted from desperate attempts to keep warm. On top of this, with power restored, many homeowners who had subscribed to variable rate electrical contracts are being hit with utility bills in the thousands of dollars. It is truly a mournful disaster.

Perhaps Congressional investigations (and it is to be hoped, a 9/11-style commission of inquiry) will find out how the insurrection happened, and how to have it never happen again. But understanding how things went so wrong in Texas is much easier to understand. The stage was set for the disaster when utilities decided not to spend money on weathering the infrastructure to keep power cheap. A contributing factor was the State of Texas not linking up the vast majority of its grid to the rest of the continental states.

Yes, that's right: Texas wanted to be on its own as regards the grid, so that it would be exempt from the federal regulations which might require certain standards for the interconnectiveness that Texas found onerous. But if it had been connected, when its own power generation failed, energy could still have come from other states to help the situation. For example, El Paso, which is on the Texas border and is connected to the larger western states' grid and not to the Texas grid, did much better through the frigid event than Dallas or Houston. Independence has come at a high cost.

The Wall Street Journal in an article on February 19 entitled "The Texas Freeze: Why the Power Grid Failed" put the lack of readiness for extreme cold at the feet of the business model used by the utilities and state policy: "Power providers can reap rewards by supplying electricity to Texas customers, but they aren't required to do it and face no penalties for failing to deliver during a lengthy emergency.... While power providers collectively failed, the companies themselves didn't break any rules. Texas officials don't require plant owners to prepare for the worst by spending extra money to ensure they can continue operating through severe cold or heat. The high prices operators can reap from such periods of peak demand were supposed to be incentive enough for them to invest in safeguarding their equipment from severe weather."

Well, that didn't happen. The deregulation provided cheaper power, but it was similar to driving without auto insurance: sure, it works fine and you save money—up until you have an accident. The article "How Texas' Drive for Energy Independence Set It Up for Disaster" in the New York Times on February 21, traced the root of the grid's failure "...to the decision in 1999 to embark on the nation's most extensive experiment in electrical deregulation, handing control of the state's entire electricity delivery system to a market-based patchwork of private generators, transmission companies and energy retailers. The energy industry wanted it. The people wanted it. Both parties supported it. 'Competition in the electric industry will benefit Texans by reducing monthly rates and offering consumers more choices about the power they use,' George W. Bush, then the governor, said as he signed the top-to-bottom deregulation legislation.... The possibility of more frequent cold-weather events was never built into infrastructure plans in a state where climate change remains an exotic, disputed concept."

When "natural monopolies" occur due to having one electrical supplier serving an area, utility regulation provides safeguards against price gouging and for public safety protection. In many states, it is required that power providers book spare capacity, held in reserve to exceed the expected demand; but this costs more (it is insurance), so there is not much of it to be found in the Texas grid as it was deemed a competitive disadvantage to producers. When temperatures went low and customers cranked up heaters, the demand greatly exceeded the supply. The entity that oversees the Texas grid (the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, or ERCOT) had to start rolling blackouts to ration power in order to avoid a total blackout from which it could take weeks to recover.

Another piece of information indicating that the disaster was avoidable: a warning in February 2011 when a heavy snowstorm caused widespread power outages in Texas. In the aftermath, federal authorities told the state that its grid was inadequately protected against winter weather. So after 10 years, the pipelines still were insufficiently insulated, no heaters were installed for instruments to keep them from freezing, and the de-icing and heating equipment that is used in wind turbines in Iowa and other cold states with wind farms was never put in place.

The winter storm was indeed extreme for Texas. But it has been known for many years that the global warming which has been brought on by burning fossil fuels will generate weather extremes: worse floods and worse droughts, hotter heat waves and colder winter extremes, more intense windstorms, and more energetic storms. It is worth that the resulting warming of the Arctic is slowing the jet stream, which normally corrals the wintery cold to the northern polar regions; this is allowing the frigid cold to leak down into areas that are not used to that degree of cold, such as Texas.

The cold weather caused all the unprepared power generating sectors to be affected: some wind turbines were frozen, but so were gas pipelines and oil supplies for fossil-fueled power stations, as well as nuclear plants, which could not get adequate water supplies for cooling. So the state that prides itself on its gas reserves and (fossil) fuel energy abundance was left powerless. To give Texas its due, it is among the states getting the highest percentage of its electric power from wind (about 10% in winter) which is laudable. But it is interesting to note how this was spun by Texas Governor Greg Abbott: in one interview on a centrist media outlet he noted that all electricity generators had problems, but in an interview on Fox News, he singled out the wind energy sector, saying the blackouts showed how we cannot rely only on renewable energy sources alone to provide power, implying that the drop in output from renewables was to blame for the state's disaster and that we should not pursue elimination of fossil fuel power.

Are we all smart enough to learn from the terrible lesson inflicted on Texas? An opinion piece from the editorial board of The New York Times sums it up the key messages from this disaster. "First, the country's energy systems must be robust enough to withstand whatever surprises climate change is likely to bring... another is making sure that America's power systems, the grid in particular, are reconfigured to do the ambitious job Mr. Biden has in mind for them—to not just survive the effects of climate change but to lead the fight against it. Mr. Biden's lofty goal is to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by mid-century and to eliminate fossil fuel emissions from the power sector by 2035. In the simplest terms, this will mean electrifying everything in sight: a huge increase in battery-powered cars and in charging stations to serve them; a big jump in the number of homes and buildings heated by electric heat pumps instead of oil and gas; and, crucially, a grid that delivers all this electricity from clean energy sources like wind and solar."

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Book Review by Sarah Kennedy

Haven't You Ever Really Loved a Tree?

The Man Who Planted Trees, and a Plan to Save the Lost by Jim Robbins is a terrific read. It weaves together one man's story and his visionary work with the scientific and cultural information which informs that work.

Michiganard David Milarch is the founder of an organization which clones champion trees, then plants them in strategic places around the world. It is his hope that by choosing champion trees for this project, their superior genetics will be able to withstand the difficult growing conditions brought about by climate change. He also hopes that in doing so, he is doing the best he can to assure this planet will be able to sustain life for generations to come.

Milarch's plan is solidly based in science, as planting trees is a simple way to sequester carbon, reduce temperatures, reduce flooding, and clean the air and soil. In addition to these benefits, there are many other interesting positive effects which come from reforesting the planet.

In one example, a Japanese chemist realized that coastal fisheries were declining out in areas where forests had been cut down and replaced by farms. He was able to show a link between reforesting the coastal shores and the banks of tributaries, and a return of an abundant supply of fish in the ocean. The scientific explanation for why this is so is explained clearly and succinctly, as is the science behind so many other ideas presented herein.

This book also delves into the ways people have connected with trees on a very deep level, throughout time: "In ancient Egypt the god Osiris in his earliest incarnation was believed to inhabit trees while the Persians believed both good and evil spirits lived inside trees... Siberian shamans believe trees mediate between Earth and Sky and are antennae for cosmic energy...."

This deep love and respect for trees feels familiar to me. About ten years ago, a beautiful mulberry tree in my small yard fell onto the house on a very still day. I was overcome with sadness. My young nephew was visiting, and could not relate to my emotional state. I eventually asked him, "Haven't you ever really loved a tree?"

"This is never going to work—you're a tree!"

The book provides inspiration to us all; may we read it, then go out and on our own work to reforest the planet.

Please go to www.ancienttreeearchive.org to learn more about David Milarch's ongoing work, and how you can help.

Please go to www.dec.ny.gov to find information on the Hudson Estuary Trees for Tribes Program. Since 2007, Trees for Tribes has engaged more than 8,000 volunteers in planting more than 100,000 trees and shrubs at sites across New York State. This site will provide information on the program, and ways individuals can get involved in tree-planting projects. One such project is a program called Buffer in a Bag, which provides landowners with a free bag of bare-root trees and shrubs to enhance a stream-side area on their property. Each Buffer in a Bag kit contains a variety of native trees and shrubs that are well suited for stream-side planting.

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Letters from our Members

Editor's Note: Send us a letter about issues that are important to you—whether local, state or national. Please submit your letter to our Newsletter Editor: Andy Moses, at andy@shil.net. Our newsletter schedule is posted at the bottom of our website's www.sierraclub.org page. We will consider letters of up to 250 words. Your letter will be published in the next newsletter upon review and acceptance by the editor. Subjects should focus on Sierra Club areas of interest: conservation, environmental protection, political action, climate change, getting outdoors, etc. Visit the Sierra Club, Atlantic Chapter, or Mid-Hudson Group website to learn more about where we stand.

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Fundraising by David Friedman

Make A Gift - Make A Difference

Our local group depends on the support of volunteers and the generosity of our membership. The work of the group takes Sierra Club volunteer effort, and of course funds. We hope that these turbulent times it's vital that we all do what we can to speak out and work for the protection of our environment and the future of our world. We welcome and appreciate your support, and encourage you to consider providing financial support for our efforts. Our mailing address is at the bottom of this newsletter.

To speak about specific opportunities, or with any questions, please contact David Friedman, Friedman_David@msn.com, or our Treasurer Richard Gunn, richard.gunn.sierraclub@gmail.com.

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