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ONE VET REVEALS THE HEALING POWER OF NATURE AND STORY THIS VETERANS DAY, LET'S HELP FORMER SERVICE MEMBERS PROCESS THEIR EXPERIENCES

By Aaron Leonard

November 11, 2021, Excerpted from Sierra Magazine

I am a father, a partner, a volunteer, an academic, and an environmentalist. I am also a veteran. From the day I enlisted in May 1987 until my retirement in November 2014, I played a role in many military operations around the world. After I left the military, I found that spending time in nature with other veterans was how I would best begin to unpack and reflect on my story in a way that would help to lighten the weight I was carrying. In a sense, each trip into the woods allowed me to reach into my rucksack and pull out a few more rocks, lessening the burden born from years of conflict and witnessing human suffering. Those days spent sleeping under the stars on group backpacking and paddling trips were how I would eventually begin to heal from the traumas of war. The stories I told on those adventures have allowed me to live, and to thrive. This is one of those stories.

On the night of February 26, 1991, I fought in the second-largest tank battle in US history. The Battle of Norfolk was an intense tank-on-tank slug fest in which thousands of US and British soldiers engaged in a deadly fight with thousands of Iraqi soldiers. The battle unfolded in the great Al-Hajarah Desert of Southern Iraq, and in less than 24 hours, 21 US soldiers were killed and 67 wounded. The Iraqi death count is estimated to be more than 1,000.

My memories of that night remain murky. I believe this is partly due to the enormous labor involved in fighting in a night-time tank battle that stretched from horizon to horizon, partly due to the numbing fatigue brought on by sleep deprivation, and partly due to trauma born from being a witness to, and the cause of, human suffering. But I do remember some of what we saw and did.

For instance, I know that early in the fight, just before the full darkness of night set in, I chose to not kill nine Iraqi soldiers peeking over the edge of a foxhole. I had them in my sights—maybe 100 meters to our front—and my



thumbs were resting lightly on the butterfly-shaped trigger of our heavy machine gun, when I thought I'd wait and see what they did next. They chose that exact moment to surrender, hands flying up and weapons cast aside, nine dirty and tired men climbing out from their hole in the desert. Later that night, I remember the feeling of death surrounding us, a sensation that returns from time to time, often triggered by a sound or smell. I experienced a physical and spiritual exhaustion so deep, it no longer feels real. We still had one more battle to fight before this

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Membership Meeting Schedule

Visit SierraLowerHudson.org and select Events

Visit RocklandSierraClub.org

All meetings via Zoom, link on websites

war would end, when another, much longer and more personal one, would begin.

There are more than 19 million living veterans in the US, each with our own stories. Many are doing well, living a healthy life back home. Many veterans will need help at some point in their lives, and sadly, there are many veterans who need help but never seek it.

I myself did not first seek help until very recently—30 years after the sun rose on the Battle of Norfolk, to be precise. Even in writing this piece, I am sharing an experience that I have kept private.

Veterans touch our lives every day. They are colleagues, friends, neighbors, and exist in every generation of many families. When a servicemember leaves the military and moves into our community, they often struggle to feel like they belong and feel lonely and isolated—often living in a type of hidden conflict between two worlds. Most will do well, but some will experience a type of pain that is difficult for them to explain.

Being a veteran does not equate to a disease or diagnosis; it's a title we earn, one that many are proud of. Veterans come from every facet of our society; they live in every community, work in every field, break every law, live and die with all of us. Veterans know that at one time in their lives they swore an oath to protect and defend us and the lands we enjoy. They have many stories like mine to share—stories that may be hard to hear at times—but telling those stories can help them process those experiences.

Every time we dismantle a barrier that our veterans face to seeking healing in the outdoors (lack of access, for instance, or lack of representation), we celebrate that victory together. But there is much work to do—many millions of veterans still face barriers to accessing even public lands on their own time with friends and family. I often remind myself that I could spend the rest of my life offering outdoor adventures to the 4,700 veterans living in my New York county, and that would not be enough to heal the enormity of the trauma and grief carried by our nation's veterans.

If you have an opportunity to thank a veteran for their service this Veterans Day, you should take it. If you want to help us in our work to unify the outdoor community

around this cause, to help veterans access and heal on the lands they swore an oath to protect, please take action now.

TAKE ACTION: Tell the Veterans Administration to fast-track the task force on outdoor recreation for veterans! Go to [SierraLowerHudson.org](https://www.sierralowerhudson.org) and click on the Issues/Action tab to sign the petition.

Lt. Col. Aaron Leonard, USA (Ret) is a senior campaign representative for Sierra Club Military Outdoors. He's also chair and co-founder of the Veterans and Military Outdoors Coalition. Aaron lives in Putnam County. Read his full story at <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/one-vet-reveals-healing-power-nature-and-story>.

Join us to work on environmental issues in Rockland County!

Rockland Sierra Club was one of the groups leading the successful effort to defeat plans to desalinate Hudson River water for Rockland's drinking water. We are now helping the County craft a sustainable water management policy. We are also working to limit new fossil fuel infrastructure and have partnered with 350.org on efforts to address climate change through divestment and through promoting Climate Smart/Clean Energy Communities programs for towns and villages.

Rockland Sierra Club usually meets on the second Monday of each month. Check [RocklandSierraClub.org](https://www.RocklandSierraClub.org) for dates and locations. For more information: pkurtz9@gmail.com or deby1012@gmail.com. Or call 845-709-0802.

2021—ACTIVISM CONTINUES DESPITE COVID

COVID-19 brought some major challenges to Sierra Club. In order to keep volunteers and staff safe, the national Club prohibited in-person events and required staff to work from home, starting in spring 2020. Eventually, by the summer of 2021 Club offices reopened with safety protocols and we were allowed to arrange outdoor events, but we are still prohibited from gathering indoors until at least February, 2022. As we go to print with this newsletter, the Omicron variant is just emerging, so it's anybody's guess when we'll be able to go back to normal meetings.

Yet Lower Hudson Group activists figured out ways to cope with these restrictions and continue our work to protect the environment. Here's a short summary of some of the accomplishments of the past year.

New meeting format

Lower Hudson Group and Rockland Sierra Club now meet monthly via Zoom rather than in person. This has allowed more members to join our meetings, and we offered speakers on various topics of interest, including pollinator gardens, PFAS in our drinking water, the Great Swamp, food scraps recycling, bird migration and Climate Smart Communities. To see upcoming meetings, click on the Events and Rockland tabs at SierraLowerHudson.org. Members with emails on file with Sierra Club usually also receive email announcements of upcoming programs.

Comments to state agencies

The NYS Department of Environmental Conservation and Public Service Commission started holding public comment hearings online, as well, which allowed more people to attend who previously would have had to drive to Albany or another hearing site. In 2021, Lower Hudson Group activists spoke at hearings and submitted written comments concerning the Danskammer and Astoria gas power plant proposals, cryptocurrency mining plans, Indian Point decommissioning concerns, the Champlain Hudson Power Express project, a feasibility study for municipalization of Rockland's drinking water, and the proposed NYS Advanced Clean Truck Rule, to name a few.

Sierra Club endorsement

Lower Hudson Group Political Committee members went through the endorsement process for some Westchester County Board of Legislators and County Executive candidates via email and virtual interviews. We called Sierra Club members to inform them of several races in which we endorsed candidates, and in at least one case,

the candidate won by about the number of members we had in that district! Especially in a low turnout election, getting out the vote is often key to winning local races.

Outdoor events

As outdoor events in our communities resumed, we started tabling again, to educate the public about our organization and some of the issues we work on. Repair Cafés were held in parking lots to repair items instead of throwing them out. We also enjoyed a hike and picnic in September as the Outings program restarted, and six members volunteered to be trained as hike leaders.

Rockland, Westchester and Putnam issues

Lower Hudson Group activists continued to work with our elected officials and coalition partners on many issues, including PFAS in our drinking water, safety concerns about the old dam in the Eastchester, Mt. Vernon and New Rochelle area, Westchester Airport expansion proposals, safe decommissioning of Indian Point, bringing Community Choice Aggregation and Community Solar to our municipalities, and learning how to assess renewable energy projects (see related articles in this issue).

Our work continues into 2022, which will be a major election year. Our victories on stopping new fossil fuel plants, with the decisions on Danskammer and Astoria, will allow us to focus more on the development of renewable energy and the associated jobs that will bring. We hope to further limit the use of PFAS chemicals which persist in our environment and our bodies, and we are calling on the governor to order the gas pipelines that run past Indian Point to be shut down during decommissioning. Please help us in this work, as well as in helping us plan meetings and keep our members posted via the Lower Hudson Group website and this newsletter. Check out our website at SierraLowerHudson.org!

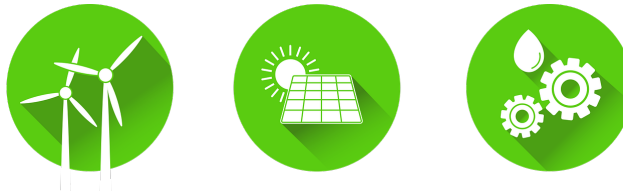


TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

By Peggy Kurtz, Leader, Rockland Sierra Club

The latest reports from the UN International Panel on Climate Change warn that we can still limit climate disruption to safer levels, but doing so will require rapid, transformational change - and at an unprecedented scale. One of the most critical actions needed is to transition as quickly as possible off fossil fuels and onto renewable energy.

A growing movement in New York State helps communities transition quickly off fossil fuels and onto electricity powered by renewable energy. Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) programs are collaborative municipal programs, through which tens of thousands of households have switched to clean energy. What makes this program so effective is that it works at the scale and speed which are so critically needed.



HOW COMMUNITY CHOICE AGGREGATION CLEAN ENERGY PROGRAMS WORK

CCA programs help communities make the urgently needed transition to renewable energy, while also protecting consumers from rate increases. With CCA programs, communities create a large buying group through which residents and small businesses may purchase renewable energy at low, fixed rates. CCA programs provide much stronger consumer protection than ESCOs (Energy Service Companies). The rates are guaranteed for the life of the program - and anyone can opt out at any time and with no exit fee. Additional savings are available through CCA Community Solar programs.



IS YOUR COMMUNITY IN A CCA CLEAN ENERGY PROGRAM?

CCA programs started in NYS with a pilot program in Westchester. Today, over two thirds of Westchester communities participate in the Westchester Power program. Six Rockland communities are participating in the Rockland Community Power program: Clarkstown, Orangetown, and the villages of Haverstraw, Nyack, South Nyack, and Upper Nyack. 20,000 Rockland households have switched to clean energy, while also collectively saving \$623,951 over eleven months. In Putnam County, two communities are currently participating in the Hudson Valley Community Power program: Philipstown and Cold Spring.



WHAT YOU CAN DO: If your town or village is not currently participating, get in touch to find out how your municipality can join the communities transitioning to 100% renewable energy!

To learn more, email rocklandclimate@gmail.com or call (845) 709-0802.

THE POWER OF ONE—SUSTAINABILITY, ONE HOUSEHOLD AT A TIME

By Gale Pisha

Two years ago, I helped count the paper ballots for the Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter [that's the New York State chapter] election for At Large Delegates to the Executive Committee. I was delighted to see that so many of our members mailed their ballots in envelopes that were repurposed, perhaps from junk mail, rather than brand new. While using one envelope rather than discarding it seems like a small act, multiplied by the hundreds of ballots received over years of elections, it adds up to meaningful savings of paper!

Similarly, reducing our individual carbon footprints adds up to significant energy savings when large numbers of people do it. Living more sustainably takes a change in mindset, but after that step, it's easy to find ways to incorporate sustainable practices into our lives. Here are just a few ideas:

Sustainable transportation

- Walk whenever possible, which benefits your health, too.
- Ride bicycles or other non-motorized vehicles.
- Combine errands to reduce the number of trips you make.
- Get familiar with local bus, train and subway schedules.
- Advocate for electrification of public transportation.
- Carpool.
- Drive a hybrid car, which can get twice the mileage out of a gallon of gasoline.
- Drive an electric car—combined with a 100% renewable electricity plan, this can bring your carbon footprint way down.

Heating our homes

- Insulate walls and attic to save heat from being lost.
- Caulk around door and window frames.
- Set your thermostat lower in winter and higher in summer if using air conditioning.
Put on a sweater in winter; in summer your home should not be so cold that you need a sweater!
- Use landscaping to provide windbreaks to shield your home from cold wind and shade your home during the hot summer.
- When your gas or oil furnace needs replacing, replace it with a heat pump, which moves heat from one place to another instead of burning fuel—combined with a 100% renewable electricity plan, this can bring your carbon footprint way down.

The food we eat and products we buy

- Buy locally sourced food.
- Buy organically produced food to promote soil health and sustainable farming.
- Plant native plants that attract pollinators.
- Eat lower on the food chain.
- Don't waste food—eat those beet greens, don't peel potatoes and apples, compost vegetable scraps, and use up food you have in the house before it goes bad.
- Join with your community to establish a food scraps recycling program.
- Drink tap water unless it is contaminated. Bottled water is less strictly regulated by the FDA than tap water is by the EPA, and it costs much more. Plus, plastic from the bottle can leach into the water.
- Bring a reusable food container to a restaurant to bring home leftovers. Bring a portable set of reusable utensils instead of grabbing plastic utensils with takeout food.
- Take shorter showers and don't leave the water running while you shave, soap up your hands, or wash dishes.
- Minimize the amount of stuff you buy. Ask yourself if you really need another garment or pair of shoes!
- Buy personal care products, clothing and other products that are not made with PFAS chemicals. Go to the SierraLowerHudson.org website, click on the Rockland tab, and in the PFAS article, find the link to a website that lists manufacturers who do not use PFAS in their products.
- Borrow books from your library instead of buying them. Interlibrary loan may be used to get books not owned by your local library.
- Repair equipment and clothing rather than buying new. Watch out for a Repair Café near you.



A USEFUL TOOL FOR ASSESSING RENEWABLE ENERGY PROJECTS

By Martha Upton, Jeff Schumann, and Sarah Wilson

The climate crisis requires that we take bold, immediate action to transition away from fossil fuels, which currently account for 68% of New York State's electrical capacity. New York's far-reaching environmental law, the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, establishes the firm goal of 70% renewable electric power by 2030. To reach this target, a large number of in-state renewable projects will need to be sited and built.

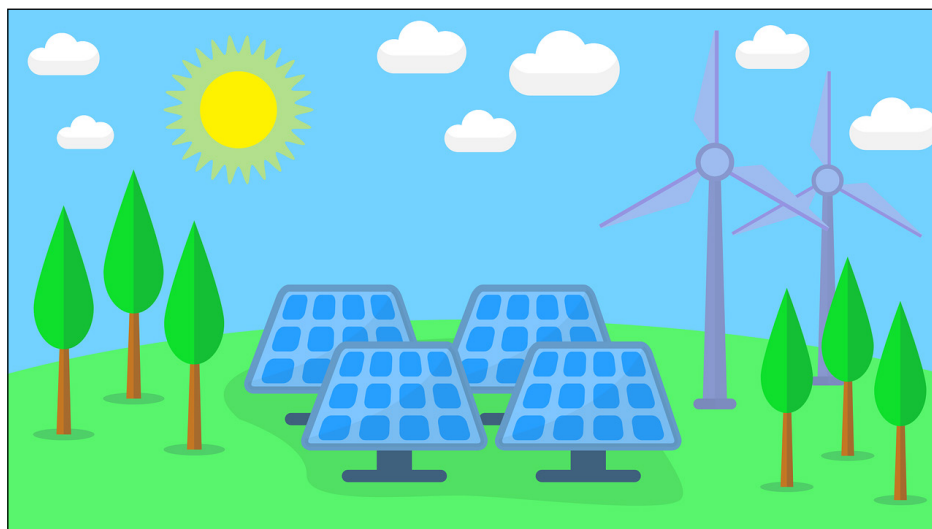
A wide variety of wind and solar projects are already in the works throughout the state. Some of these projects have been welcomed by municipalities, and others have been met with fierce resistance. While the Sierra Club strongly supports a rapid transition to clean, renewable energy, we recognize that some proposed projects are better than others.

To this end, the Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter has created a Large Scale Renewable ("LSR") assessment tool to evaluate projects 25 Megawatts or greater. Reflecting Sierra Club's commitment to equity, inclusion, and justice, the assessment considers both ecological and social impacts. Sierra Club members use the tool to evaluate the pros and cons of a project by considering nine essential criteria:

- Forested land,
- Wetlands and riparian areas,
- Birds and wildlife,
- Food production and workers,
- Local tax base
- Local labor agreements
- Community engagement
- Wider community benefits
- Proper consultation with Native nations

Several members of the Lower Hudson Group attended training in the LSR assessment tool, and we would be happy to share what we learned with other members. Though there are currently no "large scale" projects proposed for Westchester, Rockland, or Putnam, there are a number of smaller scale projects being considered.

If you are aware of a smaller scale project proposed for your area and would like to speak with one of us about how to apply the LSR criteria to assess the pros and cons of the proposal, you can reach out to Martha Upton, marthaupton76@gmail.com or Jeff Schumann, jefflynn.dinobirds@gmail.com.



CLIMATE ACTION COUNCIL REACHES A MILESTONE

By the time you read this article, the Climate Action Council (CAC), the body responsible for implementing the goals of the 2019 New York State Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), will have issued its Draft Scoping Plan. This Plan describes how each goal of the CLCPA will be achieved.

The CLCPA has two end goals: an 85% reduction of greenhouse gases and a net zero carbon economy by 2050. The CAC was supported by Working Panels which addressed six sectors of the economy: Electricity, Transportation, Buildings, Industry, Waste, and Agriculture. Each sector has its own goals that will help to achieve the two main goals. The CAC was also supported by other Working Panels which cut across all sectors and addressed the issues of Climate Justice, a Just Transition for workers, and Public Health.

There will be a 120-day comment period for the public to weigh in on the contents of the Draft Scoping Plan. **We need you to let the Climate Action Council know how to improve this Plan.** The exact dates and times of public hearings are not known as we go to press. Check our website for more detailed information including talking points on the Scoping Plan and the dates and times of hearings.



Due to the editorial deadline for this issue of Terra Firma, the outcome of the Lower Hudson Group election for excom members was not yet known. To see the new excom members, please visit SierraLowerHudson.org > About Us.

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WESTCHESTER, PUTNAM & ROCKLAND COUNTIES

*"The Earth is a fine place and worth fighting for."
—Ernest Hemingway*



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