

Dear friend and leader in the environmental community,

I hope this message finds you in the best of health and spirits. I have been a volunteer with the Sierra Club for several years. Also, as a faculty member at Howard University, I have served as a faculty advisor to the campus Environmental Society. I admire all the amazing accomplishments of national environmental groups in spite of many obstacles. I have enjoyed being part of the movement to fight climate change and plan to continue to do my part. It is in that spirit that I felt I should express my views on the strategy for doing that. It never hurts for any organization to listen to diverse viewpoints and I hope that you will find something useful in this letter.

We have achieved much success. More and more people are becoming aware of the seriousness of climate change. Yet we have a long way to go and time is of the essence. Imagine the kind of urgency that politicians and the public exhibit when confronted with an act of terrorism. In fact it is happening as we speak!

How do we get the public to show the same urgency to fight climate change as they show with terrorism?

Most groups have been working on this and there have been several excellent approaches: The “Risky Business” campaign by Bloomberg, Paulson and Steyer to highlight the economic costs; the various campaigns of Al Gore’s Climate Reality group; the long-standing advocacy of WEACTION for Environmental Justice; not to mention the efforts of 350.org. No doubt more will be discussed during the next few weeks in the run-up to the People’s Climate March and the gathering of world leaders. Yet my worry is that a lot of it will turn out to be environmentalists talking to each other. Not that it is unimportant but clearly we need to reach out to a wider audience.

1. Bring in leaders from outside of traditional environmental groups to fight for a common goal.

Like many fellow environmentalists I reached a point where I concluded that fossil fuel companies such as Exxon couldn’t be trusted to act in good faith. To this day I try to avoid patronizing such companies as much as I can. Yet at the same time I realized that I am falling into the trap set by the propaganda machine of such companies, which is to create a general atmosphere of confrontation. Because it is such a good fund-raising tool, progressive politicians and even some environmental groups use tactics of demonizing and boycotting so frequently and intensely that the general public might have become a bit desensitized to all this. **Once such an atmosphere of confrontation is created, it is then easy for those opposed to action on climate change to use it to their advantage.**

Fortunately environmental groups have an advantage, one that could help them break out of this vicious cycle of toxic public discourse. Our advantage is that

everyone cares about the environment, nature, clean air and water, even the ones who do not believe climate change is caused by carbon emissions. Thus we have a platform to build relationships with various groups, even conservative groups. **Let us speak about climate change in a way that brings people together.** Sierra Club and other groups have already shown that it is possible to work with unions, fishermen, sportsmen, ranchers and faith groups to protect the environment and promote clean energy. They have worked with groups in red states like Nebraska, Texas, Arizona, West Virginia and Georgia.

We need to redouble these efforts. Let us take these small unusual alliances and build them up to a massive scale. Let us have a big outreach campaign in the red states. Let us work with Republicans who are starting to speak out for climate action, such as Christine Whitman, Bob Inglis, Henry Paulson etc., and try to reach out to more Republicans and conservatives. **We need a grand alliance** of businessmen, faith leaders, environmentalists, laborers and people fighting for environmental justice to put pressure on the policy makers.

2. New message strategy

One of the reasons that the environmental movement was so successful earlier was that it addressed the need for clean air, clean water, a healthy neighborhood and access to parks and trails. It was easy to get people behind those causes. Much of the success of the Beyond Coal movement has been due to their emphasis on clean air and clean water. Unfortunately two things have happened that have put environmentalists at a disadvantage today: the **complicated nature of today's most pressing environmental problems and the public relations success of polluting corporations** in getting some people on their side.

The problems of climate change, environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, loss of crop diversity etc., remain somewhat complicated and distant from the average person's perspective. On the other hand, corporations – with their massive ad campaigns – have been successful in getting people to think that more drilling, more fracking, more genetic tinkering and so on are inevitable necessities for maintaining a comfortable standard of life and creating jobs.

These changed circumstances require a change in strategy and messaging. It is not enough any more to protest and boycott. While we pursue the divestment effort on the one hand, we also need to speak to people in a way that helps them understand that eliminating our collective investments in the fossil fuel markets is in their interest. People need to see that climate change is their issue, not just an environmental issue. To do that it is not enough to highlight the problem, even if we somehow manage to make it easy to understand. We need to show them that clean energy can provide a better way of life, financial savings, freedom from pollution and independence from utilities

and oil corporations. **We also need to make them feel that we are on their side**, that there are people like them who care about this problem.

One great example is the movie “Above All Else” about Texas landowners fighting the Keystone pipeline. The movie does not talk about climate change that much. The director of the movie told us that he made a deliberate decision to make the movie take the point of view of the landowners. The movie has a very visceral effect. It is heartbreaking to see their land being destroyed despite their passionate effort to prevent it. But the great thing is that some of these people ended up learning and caring about climate change a lot more because of this experience.

Recently at an environmental gathering, Patrick Carolan of the Interfaith Moral Action on climate talked about how St. Francis' environmentalism was based on his belief that all creation was one, and being with nature connected him to God. He pointed out that Pope Benedict placed climate change on par with the right to life as a moral value issue. All religions have a strong environmental message. We need to work more energetically with groups such as Interfaith Power and Light and the Evangelical Environmental Network to make people understand that climate change is a moral and spiritual issue as well.

The conservation movement of the turn of the 20th century and the Civil Rights Movement were successful because of passionate advocates such as John Muir and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who spoke fervently of our obligation towards nature and our fellow citizens, how **protecting the environment and promoting justice were spiritually and morally the right thing to do.**

3. Bringing more diversity to the environmental movement.

Environmental groups all over the country are rightfully concerned about the lack of diversity in our movement. In fact, many would contend that there are two separate environmental movements occurring: one that is dominated by white Americans and the other that is more inclusive of people of color and has a greater focus on environmental justice. This was highlighted by a recent report by University of Michigan Professor Dorceta Taylor for the Green 2.0 initiative. People who could be our natural allies such as the low-income communities and people of color who are often the first victims of pollution are not well represented in the mainstream groups.

On the other hand conservatives in red states are against us. It may be hard to believe but **I think that the reasons that alienate conservatives from embracing the environmental movement are the same factors that marginalize low-income communities and people of color from the mainstream environmental movement.** What turns off people is a perception of arrogance and elitism among environmental leaders. While none of us are intending to be arrogant or elitist, we will unintentionally create that impression if

we do not try to empathize and identify with people's concerns. **Too often we think we have all the answers.**

It is not necessary to tell people what they want to hear. There is no need to “talk down” to anyone or speak “the same language.” Creating trust and building alliances is a simple matter of people knowing that you respect them and treat them as one of your own. People can sense it when you adopt a certain tone in order to talk to them. All one needs to do is to **talk in a forthright, honest manner as if one is talking to a good friend.** If someone is mistaken or not understanding something, one should feel free to tell them so. Ignoring people because you don’t want to say uncomfortable things is the worst thing one can do.

Once we create trust, we can work to explain to people the severity of climate change and other similarly complicated issues. Even if we fail at first, we should persist. **People appreciate it when someone takes the effort to talk to them in a sincere way.** It shows that we care about their support, and hence care about them. Truth is on our side and our cause is right, so success is inevitable if we persist.