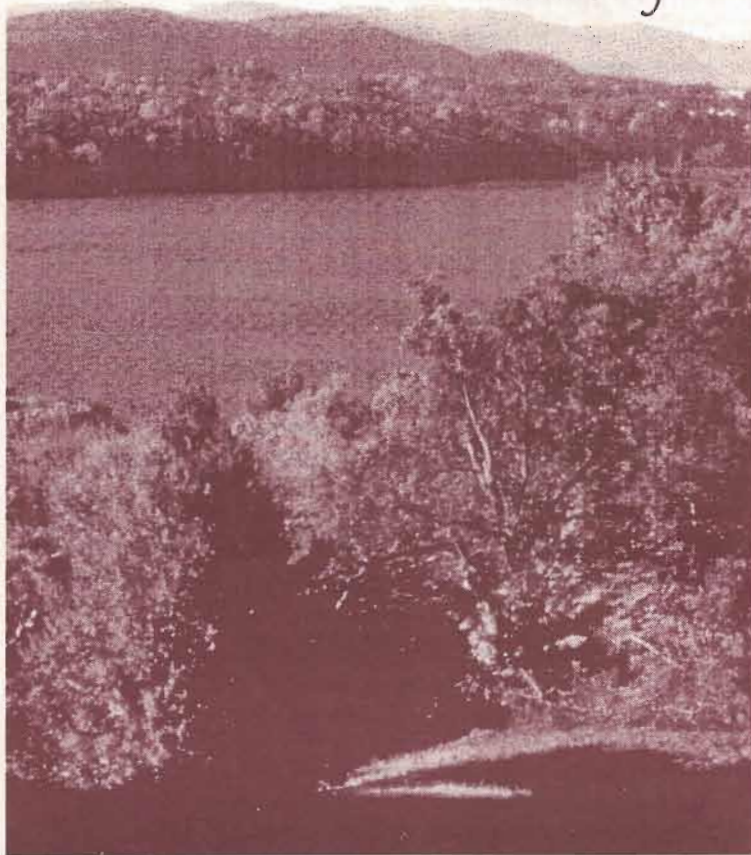


A Conference Report on

**ENVIRONMENTAL
AND HUMAN
RIGHTS:
Making the Connection**

*A Celebration of the
50th Anniversary of the
Universal Declaration of
Human Rights*



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE DAY

Over seventy-five representatives of Hudson Valley environmental and human rights organizations met on November 14, 1998 to plan strategies for working together on issues of common concern. The Conference was preceded by an open forum featuring former Secretary of Energy, Hazel O'Leary. Secretary O'Leary urged the audience to recognize that they must get political if they are going to advocate for human and environmental rights. "Pick the right candidates and hold them to account," she said. She suggested that organizations must arm themselves with information and create collaboration among those who don't usually collaborate.



Hazel R. O'Leary

Commentaries and additions from the perspective of networking, the law, advocacy, and grass roots organizing followed Dr. Noel Brown's Keynote speech. Marilyn Vetrano of Dutchess County Human Rights Commission said we can only assure human rights by ensuring environmental rights. Neil Popovic, a lawyer volunteering with the Earth Justice Legal Defense Fund, pointed out that the Earth Charter being disseminated around the world takes an ethical and moral perspective.

Legal documents tend to leave out the human factor and the effect on the quality of life. He said that there is a fundamental disconnect that takes place with economic development. The question is: Who gets the benefit and who bears the brunt? "Legal documents," he said, "can be an empowerment if they are translated to the local level." He left the audience with a reminder from the sixties: "If we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem."

Stephen Mills of the National Office of the Sierra Club described how the Sierra Club became involved in the defense of people who are being persecuted for their views and activities while trying to protect the environment. "It was the threat to the human rights of individuals," he said, "because they organized to plant trees or to stop potentially dangerous oil developments, that got our attention."

In the eighth poorest city in the US, Hartford, located in the richest state in the Union, Connecticut, organizers have created a model for all grass roots groups. Larry Charles of ONE/CHANE described how the people reacted when the city planned to double the size of a land fill - once again in the poorest part of town. Following Secretary O'Leary's admonition, they made it a political issue. They then proceeded to mobilize every faction in the community that had a vested interest to protect: churches, the elderly, women, youth, mothers. They followed three principles of promoting eco-justice: community ownership, community control and community accountability.

The keynote presentation and the panel were followed by small group discussions. Following are some possible **ways to connect environmental and human rights** as they evolved from the small group discussions:

- Encourage connecting through coalitions to support critical issues.
- Educate ourselves, teachers, youth, activists, and elected officials, etc.
- Encourage reverence for the Earth and how people are related to the Earth's ecosystem as demonstrated by Native American values.

A MORAL CHALLENGE



Dr. Noel Brown

In the keynote address, Dr. Noel Brown challenged the participants of the Conference to identify one thing that works for everyone. He answered his own challenge, "Planet earth is the only phenomenon that has worked for everyone since the dawn of human history. In the 21st Century," he said, "the view of the earth from outer space will replace Coca Cola as the logo most easily recognized in all parts of the world."

The earth is a cosmic masterpiece and as E.B. White said, "I own a share of corporate earth but I am uneasy about the management." We are all crew on the spaceship earth; how has it fared on our watch? Those who follow global trends know it has not fared well. The ship is not in a good state of repair.

Although governments demonstrated good intention at the Rio Conference in 1992 and after, there has been no follow through. Five years later things were even worse; the reconvening conference was labeled Rio minus five.

So how are we going to address the problems we have created such as global warming? The change in temperature level is not as significant as the rate of change. It is the unprecedented increase in the rate of change that is producing unstable climatic systems. The atmosphere becomes energy retentive and produces not only instability but unpredictability. The devastation in Honduras in 1998 has shown what will happen if unstable weather persists. This disaster has demonstrated that technology has made us a single global audience, perhaps even a global species. This species has the power to change the ecosystem.

As a result of technology we think, laugh, cry, grieve, celebrate and care globally. This capacity for global caring could be our salvation. But we cannot wait for disaster to trigger our caring and concern. We need to act without the disaster and translate everything global into local and the local into the global. The UN Earth Charter, an agreement on principles that can be codified into law by governments, has the potential to help with this. The process for implementing this document is modeled on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Technology is a paradox. It has given us the power to become a force of nature that may inflict harm to the earth and it has enabled us to see the earth as a whole that creates a sense of oneness. Technology also has made possible long term forecasts and enables us to assess the consequences of our actions before they occur. This allows us to apply the precautionary principle. Existing trends are not destiny.

Dr. Brown concluded that we have a moral challenge. He pointed out that we cannot escape the past nor can we avoid inventing the future. With our knowledge and a sense of responsibility for the welfare of human kind and the earth, the challenge is that if we cannot act morally we have the tools to at least act prudently. "We must choose a future for a world that works for everyone."

Dr. Brown headed up the North America Office of UNEP for twenty years. He now serves as President of The Friends of the United Nations.

HIGHLIGHTS (cont'd)

- Promote ownership of a community by the community.
- Invest in a socially responsible way.
- Develop indicators of degradation and pollution.
- Establish a phone service to assist with accessing social services.

In the closing plenary, participants suggested *means to strengthen solidarity* of organizations in the Hudson Valley.

- Expand the coalition developed in planning the Conference and develop specific actions with increased diversity of the groups involved.
- Support the Hudson Valley Sustainable Communities Network.
- Support the 1994 Draft Declaration of Principles on Human Rights and the Environment.
- Increase communication through the media including the Internet.

Some *priority issues for the Hudson Valley* were identified during the plenary discussions that confirmed those compiled by the sponsors in June and September 1998:

- PCBs in the Hudson River.
- Closed public hearings which tend to be rubber stamps of foregone conclusions so that public opinion does not contribute to decision-making.
- Lack of accountability by the Environmental Protection Agency with respect to flexibility for small corporations as well as large.
- Need for corporate responsibility with respect to the true cost to victims.
- Poverty, poor neighborhoods, racism and the environment.

FOLLOWING UP TO DEVELOP A MORE POWERFUL VOICE

Two recommendations of the afternoon plenary have been followed up since the conference. These were:

1. To increase the diversity of participation by meeting with the grass roots constituency of some of the co-sponsors - In March 1999, members of the Conference Planning Committee visited the Independent Farm Workers in Florida, NY. In May, a group of farmers made a return visit to the Phillies Bridge Farm. This exchange demonstrated that it takes time and lots of dialogue to identify appropriate issues that strike a common bond.

2. To strengthen the coalition of environmental and human rights groups - A questionnaire was designed to learn from each group their interest in working with the Coalition. Results of the questionnaire will provide the basis for future action. Strengthening of a Coalition that addresses environmental and human rights in the Hudson Valley will:

- Create a more powerful voice
- Identify and explore controversial issues
- Disseminate information to the public

Earth Prayer

Following is a condensation of a traditional Native American Opening Prayer, led by Kay Olan Rotzler to open the Conference. This Opening or Thanksgiving Address is an ancient prayer of the Hodeneshone (Iroquois) elders said before and after an event of importance. An oral memory, it can take some four hours to tell in its entirety. It is a preamble to the Great Law of Peace. We offer apologies for the liberties taken in sharing the heart of the prayer.

We who have gathered together are responsible that our cycle continues. We have been given the duty to live in harmony with one another and other living things. We give greetings that our people still share the knowledge of our culture and ceremonies and are able to pass it on. We have our elders here and also the new faces yet to be born, which is the cycle of our families - for this we give thanks and greetings. **Now our minds are one.**

We give greetings and thanks to our Mother the Earth - she gives us that which makes us strong and healthy. We are grateful that she continues to perform her duties as she was instructed. The women and Mother Earth are one - givers of life. We are her color, her flesh and her roots. **Now our minds are one.**

We greet and give thanks to all of the gifts of Mother the Earth: the medicine plants; the plant life; the three main foods, called the three sisters: the corn, the bean and the squash; the spirit of waters; the animal life; the trees of the world; the winged creatures and their songs. **Now our minds are one.**

We listen and hear the voices of the four winds. To the thunderers we call our Grandfathers we give greetings and thanks. **Now our minds are one.**

Our thoughts now turn to the sky. We see the sun, the source of life. We are instructed to call him our Eldest Brother. With the sun we can see the perfect gifts for which we are grateful. Our Brother sun nourishes Mother Earth and is the source of light and warmth. Our Brother is the source of all fires of life. With every new sunrise is a new miracle. **Now our minds are one.**

During the night time we see the moon. We have been instructed to address her as our Grandmother. In her cycle she makes her face new in harmony with other female life. Our Grandmother continue to lead us. We are grateful and express our thanksgiving. **Now our minds are one.**

The stars are the helpers of Grandmother Moon. They have spread themselves all across the sky. As we view the beauty of the Stars we know that they too are following the instructions of the Creator. **Now our minds are one.**

The four powerful spirit beings who have been assigned by the Creator to guide us both by day and night are called the Sky Dwellers. For the power of direction we give greetings and thanks to the Sky Dwellers. **Now our minds are one.**

We now turn our thoughts to the Creator himself. We choose our finest words to give thanks and greetings to him. He has prepared all things on earth for our peace of mind. Then he said "I will now prepare a place for myself where no one will know my face, but I will be listening and keeping watch on the people moving about the earth." And indeed, we can see that all living are faithful to their duties as he instructed them. We will therefore gather our minds into one and give thanks to the Creator. **Now our minds are one.**

SPONSORING ORGANIZATIONS

- Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks
- * Boughton Place
- Cancer Awareness Coalition, Inc.
- CedarHeart Lodge
- * Center for Constitutional Rights
- CLASP (Caribbean and Latin American Support Project)
- Common Ground Dispute Resolution, Inc.
- Dispute Resolution Center of Orange and Putnam Counties
- * Dutchess County Human Rights Commission
- * Eleanor Roosevelt Center (ERVK) at Val-Kill
- Friends of the Shawangunks
- Friends of the United Nations
- Global Education Associates
- Highland Cultural Center
- * Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, Inc.
- Hudson Valley Sustainable Communities Network
- Hudson River Valley Greenway
- League of Women Voters of Mid-Ulster County
- Mid-Hudson National People's Campaign
- * Mohonk Consultations, Inc.
- * Mohonk Preserve, Inc.
- * National Park Service
- Natural Resources Defense Council
- Planned Parenthood of the Mid-Hudson Valley
- Rural and Migrant Ministry, Inc.
- * Scenic Hudson
- * Shawangunk Valley Conservancy
- * State University of New York at New Paltz
- Ulster County Human Relations Commission
- Ulster Sullivan Mediation
- Wallkill Valley Land Trust
- Wittenberg Center for Alternative Resources
- YWCA Youth against Racism
- * *Members of the Planning Committee*



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