

RACHEL KASTENBERG*

Living as if Nature Mattered

We certainly have traveled a long road to get to this point, and it is now my great honor to welcome all of you to the twenty-third annual Public Interest Environmental Law Conference. This year's conference is especially exciting due to its co-sponsorship by the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (E-LAW) and the presence of nearly seventy-five E-LAW partners from more than thirty countries.

This remarkable international presence is even more important now than it ever has been throughout the history of this conference. We now are in an age during which wars are fought without foresight, in which our country is deeply polarized, and much of the world looks skeptically, at best, at the actions of the United States. With the problems our globe faces, further polarization and fragmentation is not viable. Together, humanity stands on the brink of uncertainty. How will global warming really change ecosystems around the world? Can we prevent what would be only the sixth mass extinction the earth has ever endured? These issues demand solutions; yet the irony is that people do not believe what they cannot see.

That is why the subtitle to Bill Devall's book, *Deep Ecology*, inspired us to choose this year's theme: Living as if Nature Mattered. Note the past tense. It often seems like political agendas and the mass media place nature on the back burner—as if it does not really matter. But maybe, occasionally, we should try to live like it does. Terrorism has overshadowed President Bush's continued rollbacks of environmental protections in the U.S. The environment—the most critical agenda item on humanity's long-term meeting with the planet—often seems to drop into an abyss that is acknowledged in passing, but then overlooked by many. Those who obsess over war should acknowledge the real-

* Rachel Kastenberg, 2005 Public Interest Environmental Law Conference Co-Director, J.D. expected 2006, University of Oregon School of Law.

6 J. ENVTL. LAW AND LITIGATION [Vol. 20, 2005]

ity of the unimaginable global conflict we are facing if we do not change our ways.

Perhaps a global shift *has* begun. For the first time ever, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to an environmentalist, and a connection was made between peace and sustainability, between war and the management of our natural resources. Upon hearing that she was being awarded the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai stated:

It is evident that many wars are fought over resources which are now becoming increasingly scarce. If we conserved our resources better, fighting over them would not then occur . . . so, protecting the global environment is directly related to securing peace . . . those of us who understand the complex concept of the environment have the burden to act. We must not tire, we must not give up, we must persist.¹

I believe, and I think most of you also believe, that nature does matter—not in the past tense, but in the present tense, actively, now. Therefore, we must all, as citizens of the world, do a better job of *living* as people who know that the environment does matter. We cannot live without the natural world. That's the bottom line. No matter the side of the polarized spectrum on which we now stand, we all rely on the same planet to live. As threats to the environment accumulate, this is a reality that no one can escape.

The changes we now face will eventually affect everyone on the planet, from those that live on less than a dollar a day to the wealthiest among us whose riches exceed the gross domestic product of some nations. Within our shared space, this equity gap cannot continue to widen. Not only must we close the current equity gap, we must close the intergenerational equity gap, which grows wider as the polar ice caps continue to melt and the oceans continue to die. We owe it not only to ourselves, but especially to future generations. Unity and foresight are key.

For now, it is our duty to forge ahead, to bring together the dissenters. We must take a detour from our current entrenched path—a detour to a sustainable way of living. Then, many generations from now, our grandchildren's grandchildren will be living on a healthy planet because we realized that nature matters to

¹ Friends of the Greenbelt Movement North America, *available at* <http://gbmna.org/w.php?id=10> (last visited Sept. 28, 2005).

Living as if Nature Mattered

7

each and every one of the more than six billion of us who now inhabit this earth.

I challenge each and every one of you to help carve out this detour to a sustainable world, to create this change. Use this conference to expand your public-interest law practice, further your education as a student, reinvigorate your activist spirit, immerse yourself in an atmosphere of new ideas, or to meet people who are working to make the world a better place every day of their lives. In whatever way you can, truly begin to live as if nature mattered even more to you—to the world—than you may already think it does.

Having said that, I have just one more request for you: enjoy your time here. Thank you.

