

Welcome Speech to the Twenty-Second Annual Public Interest Environmental Law Conference

Good evening. On behalf of Land-Air-Water, Friends of Land-Air-Water, and all of the numerous volunteers who helped put this conference together, it is my distinct honor and privilege to welcome all of you to the twenty-second annual Public Interest Environmental Law Conference, the “PIELC.”

Contrary to popular belief, you are not attending the E-LAW conference. The good people at E-LAW, the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide, can’t provide much help when it comes to knowledge of the PIELC schedule. But more importantly, the law student organizers of the PIELC would likely provide questionable advice on matters of international environmental law. E-LAW is a local non-profit alliance with real environmental lawyers, while the PIELC is the conference you’re attending. Should things work out for us students, one day we’d love to work for E-LAW. Until then, please allow me to indulge myself by explaining why it is such an honor and privilege to welcome you here tonight.

For conference organizers, after spending the past year helping organize this event of over 130 panels, keynoters, special events, and 3,000 participants, it is easy for us to wonder late into the night, “Why are we doing this?” What is the point of bringing conference participants together to only disperse in three days? The answer is much bigger than most of us organizers tend to realize. For this conference has a life of its own—breathing real promise for social change through these institutional walls. Potential for change from this one event is not confined to the events listed in the conference brochure. The real magic of this event happens through the networking in the halls, finding common ground, and forming alliances across issues, and outside of the physical buildings. Seven years ago, The Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment formed over a pitcher at the pub down the street, when environmentalists and union representatives began to recognize

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commonalities in their struggles. E-LAW was actually formed here fifteen years ago, when public interest lawyers from ten different countries discovered that communities in their countries were facing similar environmental challenges.

This one event has the ability to inspire in unanticipated ways: from sharing legal strategies that will make real tangible differences in the world, such as using the Red Tree Vole as an endangered species to save old-growth forests, to inspiring quiet individuals that stand near the back of crowded rooms during particular panel topics. As one of those inspired individuals seven years ago, when I attended the PIELC for the first time as a high school student, and for the first time began to think of pursuing a career in environmental law, it is truly an honor and privilege to welcome you here tonight. This is the mere beginning of an event that will surely, once again, inspire, rejuvenate, and promise to affect real change.

We need real change. I imagine most in this room recognize this need for real change. We need a more diverse environmental movement, and we need for events such as the PIELC to accurately reflect this diversity. We've worked very hard to make this year's PIELC such an event. In many ways we were successful and in many ways we came up short. For example, we have been able to incorporate more input from community members this year, by including events like the Open Forum Room, and ending the conference with a closing discussion. On the other hand, we are disappointed that due to two cancellations, we have two more male keynote speakers than female. But it's not just about numbers. When we work together to achieve true diversity, we will transcend numbers, and transcend the tokenism that can result. When we work together to achieve true diversity, we will create a movement where differences in race and gender and experience are not just present, but are welcomed and celebrated. I'm calling on us to work together to achieve this true diversity, and I'm challenging us to unite, rather than divide, in these critical times.

We have much need for unity. Given the current full-fledged assault on environmental progress on every front, which you may have ample opportunity to learn about throughout this weekend, we need to unite now more than ever. Divisive issues in the environmental movement, while still needing attention, only serve to "divide and conquer" given the current political climate. This is why we chose this year's conference theme, "Rousing the Restless Majority." Given the great influence that politics have in

environmental policies, and the seemingly crucial nature of this election year in determining the direction of the next four years ahead, we wanted to emphasize the role of politics in environmental decisions. Most of all, in choosing this year's conference theme, we wanted to inspire us all to help "rouse the restless majority" to turn the tides, to unite together, and, in the words of Margaret Atwood, *nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, "to not let the bastards grind us down."

On that note, I take my leave welcoming you all to the twenty-second annual PIELC, looking forward to the sheer activist energy, collaboration, and inspiration of the weekend ahead, and turn the microphone over to Jeremy Arling to introduce tonight's first speaker, Jane Roberts.