

PIELC

ZACH WELCKER*

Welcome Speech to the Twenty-Fifth Annual Public Interest Environmental Law Conference Cultivating Corridors for the People: The Next Twenty-Five Years

On behalf of the students of Land Air Water, all of our fantastic conference volunteers, and the other conference co-directors, Amanda Freeman, Sam Gaugush, Alyssa Johl, and Becki Kammerling, I'd like to thank you all for coming to Eugene to help us celebrate the 25th Annual Public Interest Environmental Law Conference (PIELC). We are honored to have Vandana Shiva and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. here tonight to help set the tone for four days of inspiration. We are also privileged to have many former co-directors in attendance. Because of their vision and dedication, this conference has grown from an initial gathering of fifteen speakers and seventy-five attendees into the world's most important environmental law conference. Because of contributions from people such as you, the global reach of our twenty-four previous meetings has been staggering.

For instance, in the early 1980s, several University of Oregon law students were so moved by the conference that they decided to start their own journal dedicated solely to environmental issues. The Journal of Environmental Law and Litigation is now one of the most heavily cited environmental law journals on the

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West Coast. During the 1989 PIELC, a group of participants founded Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide, a nongovernmental organization providing legal support and guidance to public interest attorneys, scientists, and activists from around the world. Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide now has over 300 members in sixty countries. The Center for Race, Poverty, and the Environment publishes a newsletter to continue exploring environmental justice issues that first emerged during the 1990 PIELC.

Despite all of these successes, we still have a great deal of work ahead of us. Powerful governments and businesses continue to exploit our natural systems for short-term economic gain. Neighbors continue to turn against neighbors while corporations steal the farm and dance stealthily away. The world cooks like never before while the chef in the big white house is just beginning to admit that we have turned on the oven. Subdivisions named after ecosystems they destroy continue to hoist street signs bearing names of threatened species. The politics of fear continue to shift our attention toward the personal losses we might sustain rather than collective losses we are all enduring.

As we look to meet these types of challenges in the next twenty-five years, we must respond to them systemically. For instance, we should not consider our work to stop a clear-cutting operation here in Oregon to be complete until we are certain that it won't relocate to Brazil. We should not deem the protection of the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge to be final until we have an energy policy that makes development of its oil reserves altogether unnecessary. We should hesitate to celebrate the recovery of the gray wolf until we have eradicated the mentality that nearly caused the wolf's demise.

Effecting systemic change of this magnitude obviously requires the participation of people who are not in this room. As we spend the next few days discussing current environmental problems and potential legal solutions, we should all be mindful that vast global problems cannot be solved through legal action alone. Our work as citizens of this Earth requires us to tap into the depths of our imagination in order to reach out to people who are reluctant to join the environmental movement. We need to weave together solutions to social and environmental problems in such an intricate pattern that it becomes impossible to separate the two.

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If a corridor of suitable habitat is created between two isolated grizzly bear populations, there is a good chance that a bear or two will keep walking as long as there are berries along the path and plenty of fish in the river it follows. Our hope is that all of you will use this conference as an opportunity to create a vision for the future that is so compelling and so inclusive that masses of people will wind up fighting to protect our planet without remembering when or why they even started along the path.

When the fiftieth PIELC convenes, may the participants look back to this conference—to you and all the good people sitting around you—as the spark that ignited a unified movement for justice. We need this catalyst like a polar bear needs pack ice, like a farmer needs fertile soil, like a spawning salmon needs the waters where it was born. We should not wait for the next Katrina or tsunami to exert our collective power. We need to start cultivating it today.

