

Focus the Nation Opening Remarks and Introduction of Keynote Speaker William Rees

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It is so deeply meaningful for us to start today's critical dialogue, as we focus the nation and our campuses on global warming, with an invocation from our friend, alum, and colleague, Chief Oren Lyons, a leader among the Onondaga nation, which has a great tradition of urging us all to keep the "seventh generation" in mind when making decisions today—in fact, their leadership, exemplified by the Onondaga's unique land rights action that is based on the Haudenosaunee principles of good stewardship, focusing solely on claims that aim to protect and conserve the land's natural resources, is an inspiration to us all.

And speaking of tradition, it is so appropriate, for a topic as momentous as global climate change, to return this nation's attention to the tradition of teach-ins—which carry such history and convey such urgency by association with the great teach-ins of our past, gatherings for peace, for civil rights, for justice.

The questions at issue in this National teach-in are at their core questions of peace, of civil rights, and of justice—too. Sustaining our environment is about sustaining our future; it is also about the health and welfare of peoples all over the globe; and we should never forget that the degradation of our environment at our own hands is fundamentally a question of justice, environmental justice and human rights go hand in hand.

The wealthiest nations on our globe have done the most damage; the poorest nations have been left to suffer the consequences. The same can be said at home. Who is left to bear the brunt of mercury contamination in Onondaga Lake or epidemic rates of childhood asthma in the poorest neighborhoods of Syracuse? While we are not alone in facing questions of environmental justice, we are also not to be exempt from finding answers. And finding answers to these and many other questions—about indoor environmental quality, water resources, renewable energy and more—is what today's teach-in is about.

Our local teach-in is a joint effort of SUNY-ESF and SU in partnership with the Onondaga County Resource Recovery Agency—thanks go to co-organizers Rachel May and Holly Rosenthal, as well as Steve Lloyd and the many members of the University Sustainability Action Coalition who put their collective energy to bring this event to our campus and to keep it environmentally friendly too!

And in the spirit of partnership that characterizes this event, welcome to our representatives from government at all levels: Congressman Jim Walsh, Assemblyman Bill Magnarelli, Mayor Matt

¹ Given January 31, 2008 at Hendricks Chapel as part of the national teach-in coordinated by Focus the Nation: Global Warming Solutions for America, www.focusthenation.org.

Driscoll, Onondaga County Director of Environment David Coburn, and New York State DEC Chief of Climate Science and Technology Alan Belenz. Your participation today signals the recognition throughout the public sector that the issues we're addressing today warrant bipartisan collaboration at the local, state, and national levels.

For too long, we have allowed the problems being addressed by today's teach-in to remain in our peripheral vision, hoping that they would either simply dissipate or that someone somewhere would devise solutions that would allow us all to just go about our business as usual. But decades of environmental degradation are producing effects today so acutely harmful to our existence that we know we can no longer afford to relegate these problems to the periphery of our vision. We know that we must put them front and center—we must focus on them—or we imperil our own lives and those of every generation to follow us.

And while there are many local examples on which to focus, embedded in the unique history of our city and region and in the habits of consumption on our own campuses, the problems underlying them resonate easily around the globe, from the Arctic to Antarctica and from Beijing to Boston. As our first speaker this morning has written.

“Virtually everyone on Earth is aware that we have an ecological crisis and a population problem, and now there is fear of increasing geopolitical strife. We are utterly dependent on the resources of a tiny planet isolated in space with no hope of finding alternative supplies, and yet, we too seem unable to devise a system that will allow us to find the right balance with our environment.”²

So, how do we overcome what we perceive to be overwhelming challenges in solving the problems which generations—including our own—have created? How do we begin to understand the linkages between the global nature of environmental destruction and our everyday lives?

Certainly we are trying locally to redefine the balance between consumption and replenishment as our joint sustainability committee examines our own practices:

- We signed the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment to identify and reduce greenhouse emissions on our campus.
- We've also made strides in the areas of recycling: we are now recycling approximately 250 tons of paper, glass, and metals as well as electronic equipment such as computers, monitors and keyboards.
- We've boosted energy conservation by committing to buy 20 percent of our electric supply from power generated from renewable resources and by making our buildings more energy efficiency by upgrading roof insulation and using fluorescent fixtures.
- We've also reduced excess use of chemicals in cleaning, replacing these cleaners with environmentally-neutral products when possible, to improve indoor air quality.

² “Is Humanity Fatally Successful?” Rees, W.E. 2004 *Journal of Business Administration and Policy Analysis* 30-31: 67-100 (2002-2003).

- We now use soy-based inks in our Printing Services as they produce fewer air quality issues.

These are, of course, only small steps toward getting our hands around the magnitude of the problems and the complexity of the solutions. And that is what we need to talk about today—from the global to the local; from the general to the specific.

As we talk, we can look for inspiration to the great activists for justice around the world, so many of whom have seen the fundamental connection between human rights, environmental sustainability and justice, and everyday practices that we will either change soon, or doom us all. Consider the pioneering leadership of the great Kenyan activist and Nobel Peace Laureate, Wangari Muta Maathai, who organized women to plant trees and thereby reverse de-forestation and promote a stable economic base. She said of her efforts, during her acceptance speech in Oslo, in 2004:

“In order to assist communities to understand these linkages, we developed a citizen education program, during which people identify their problems, the causes and possible solutions. They then make connections between their own personal actions and the problems they witness in the environment and in society...In the process, the participants discover that they must be part of the solutions. They realize their hidden potential and are empowered to overcome inertia and take action...Entire communities also come to understand that while it is necessary to hold their governments accountable, it is equally important that in their own relationships with each other, they exemplify the leadership values they wish to see in their own leaders, namely justice, integrity and trust.”

This is precisely what we are here to do today. We are here to work collaboratively, as citizens from many backgrounds, many professions, and many political stripes, to work as a community of experts, sharing what we know about how our everyday practices leave an imprint—a footprint, if you will—not only on our own community, but on the nation and the planet.

And who better to start us on the right foot than Professor William Rees, from the University of British Columbia, who helped frame the terms of today’s environmental movement and whose teaching and research is focused on sustainability in our everyday practices and on accountability of policy makers. This renowned scholar—winner of the 2007 “genius” Trudeau Fellowship Prize—is co-investigator (with among others ESF’s own Jack Manno) in the “Global Integrity Project,” founding fellow of the One Earth Initiative, and recognized world-wide as the originator of the “Ecological Footprint Analysis” that measures our human impact on nature. As Rees has said: “No lifestyle is sustainable if it could not be extended to all members of the human family without overloading vital global life-support systems...” and that is just what he has shown that we are doing:

For example, the ecological footprint analysis suggests that the average ecological footprint of each American is 23.7 acres, while the number of biologically productive areas available per person worldwide is only 4.5 acres (figures based on 2003 data collected by the Global Footprint Network).

This kind of information is why we are all here today, to try and find solutions to stop this over-consumption of resources and the undeniable consequences of complacency. It is also why we invited Professor Rees to jump start today's discussion.

In solidarity, then, with colleges and universities around the country, please join me in welcoming Dr. William Rees.