

Polly Higgins Inauguration Speech, Oslo University

Dr Polly Higgins' Inauguration Speech read at the Opening Ceremony of her Honorary Professorship at Oslo University on the 11th of October 2013.

It is my honour to be the Arne Naess Professor this year, here in Oslo, following in the footsteps of a great man who paved the way for me being here today. My contribution to Deep Ecology is my deep commitment to using my skills as a lawyer, my deep enquiry into how we can create laws that put people and planet first and my deep love of the Earth. There are too few of us who give our lives in service to something greater than the self, so many more are needed now than ever before to become Voices for the Earth. It is only by many more of us saying 'Enough, this must end' that the Ecocide will stop. And I for one shall continue until the job is done.

It is my commitment to you that a law of Ecocide shall become a crime. It's now only a matter of time.

So what is Ecocide? Ecocide, as defined by me, is the extensive damage to, destruction of or loss of ecosystem(s) of a given territory, whether by human agency or by other causes. So there are two types of Ecocide; one, human-caused and the other non-human. Ecocide is a crime of consequence - no intent is required. This is because most Ecocide, especially corporate Ecocide, is not done with intent. What is intended is to create profit without being held to account for the consequences.

My time on the podium is short so I shall focus on just one Ecocide that has particular relevance to Norway: the Tar Sands in Canada which are probably the most hidden, yet most horrific example of Ecocide I have experienced. Early last year I received an email from a photographer friend working on an assignment for WWF who wrote to me about what he had experienced. These are his words:

"It is truly shocking up here. The environmental devastation is unbelievable. The local folk, at least the white guys seem to turn a blind eye to the damage. Maybe that's because about 90% of the population of Fort McMurray are employed by the oil industry. A dump truck driver up here can earn \$200,000 a year, so all they seem to be bothered about is the cash.

I am getting massive hassle off security guards, who are following me everywhere. The Shell ones are particularly aggressive. So far the only time I have escaped them was when I commissioned a helicopter for 2 hours to get some aerials. You don't really see much from ground level, but from the air it is breathtakingly massive. They really do not want you to see what is going on up here. Today I was driving along, nowhere near any tar sands mines, when I was pulled over by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. They pointed out they had had complaints about me, and that I had to be very careful taking pictures, if I didn't want to be arrested. This follows complaints from Shell security guards. When I explained to them that I thought Canada was a free country with freedom to photograph, they got rather tongue tied. They couldn't quite decide whether I was doing anything wrong or not.

My problems have been as nought compared to Dr John O'Connor, whom I have met a couple of times now. He has worked as a doctor in the First Nation communities up here for many years. He became aware that the communities downstream of the tar sands mines were seeing high rates of rare cancers. One in particular, bile duct cancer is normally seen in one in 100,000 people. He

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found six cases in a village of 1200 people. When he raised his concerns that this might be connected to the tar sands, he expected the authorities would launch an investigation. How wrong was he, instead they charged him with 4 cases of professional misconduct. He has spent the last five years fighting his case, and the college of physicians has just found that the government claims are completely without any basis, and have exonerated him. He is still very much a watched man, as he is determined to bring this problem to the attention of the world. I went up to Fort McKay to meet him this afternoon. He had arranged for one of his patients to come into the surgery so I could get some photographs of her being treated. She has kidney cancer, and has had half of both her kidneys removed. I also met and photographed a 4 year old boy, who had been born with an under developed heart. He has since undergone four major operations. Apparently this was seen commonly in Russian babies born near Chernobyl, after the nuclear explosion. It is pretty moving and humbling to meet this people and to have the privilege of being able to photograph them. I just hope that when I get home, I can muster some publicity to try and raise the awareness of whats going on up here.

I can't wait to get out of Fort Mac, away from the security guards, police and the appalling air pollution."

So I ask myself, why should this stop? Because unconventional fossil fuel operations and their attendant infrastructure and waste disposal practices pollute air, destroy water, exacerbate climate change, stifle investments in renewable energy, provide jobs that are toxic and temporary, use land as a quick fix, destroy ancient arboreal forests, peatland and wetlands, industrialise the rural landscape, bring light pollution and noise pollution into our rural communities, destroy roads, increase traffic fatalities, spread spiderwebs of potentially explosive pipelines across the landscape, destroy the bedrock of our world, and inject our lands with massive amounts of carcinogenic chemicals. It's an outlaw enterprise that doesn't apply in tomorrow's vision of a better world. It should be abolished. Period.

We have here today one of the bravest men I know, Clayton Thomas-Mueller, who like me has given his life to standing up and speaking out to bring an end to this particularly horrific Ecocide. Clayton speaks on behalf of the indigenous world - and what he has to say applies to many millions of indigenous people across the world who suffer similar fates, be it through destructive fossil fuel practices, mining of thorium, or the use of industrial chemicals, pesticides, GM and mono-cropping. Clayton, welcome.

I reach out as a Celt and as someone who greatly supports the Idle No More movement that is fast spreading across the waters from Canada and America. Idle No More is a Peaceful Revolution that begins with each of us.

You will all know I am sure of the Earth Charter principles, the primary principle being the respect of Earth and life in all it's diversity. In-fact, the Earth Charter principles were adopted by decision of Oslo's Community Parliament in 2003, and unlike most countries in the world Norway has embedded an environmental well-being provision in it's Constitution. Tomorrow in Oslo the Nobel Peace Prize will be announced by Thorbjørn Jagland, Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, yet your leaders turn a blind eye to the finance and businesses that flow into the Tar Sands. Nothing is being done to stem this flow. A law of Ecocide will stop this.

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When our leaders fail to look to the consequences, or make decisions that lead to mass damage and destruction, that contribute to CO2 and other greenhouse gases that are in excess - then we must hold them to account. Decisions that lead to Ecocide are no longer justified.

I call this leadership crime. Where good men and women fail to face the cancer of our time, the cancer that is destroying our Earth and compromising our well-being, the cancer continues to spread despite all the indicators that tell us we are on the verge of collapse.

But this story of our time can have a different ending - the decision is up to us. Not just me, but every person in this room. What is our legacy? Mass damage and destruction or a world where we live in peace. Destroying our world is a violence of the greatest magnitude that carries with it enormous consequences that play out in the lives of people who are not yet born. Ecocide is a crime against nature, humanity, future generations and most importantly of all a crime against peace.

Remarkably Ecocide was to become a crime in the mid-1990's. The Rome Statute, which is the most important legal document that put in place the International Criminal Court and codified the Crimes Against Peace, had in its draft a 5th Crime. For a period of 11 years many people were involved in this closed-door process; lawyers, member States and UN Special Rapporteurs. At the 11th hour, Ecocide was removed, not only as a war crime but also as a peace crime despite the fact that countries had already given their support. Objections were made, but no reasons were given. At the very top level our leaders failed to put in place the one international crime that would stop mass damage and destruction.

Imagine the world we would be in now had it been a crime back then. Statoil would be Stat-renewable, Shell - who just announced 2 days ago that they were moving their practices into clean energy - and BP who tried and failed to go beyond petroleum before, would all be tomorrow's solution instead of today's problem.

So Ecocide is a law to make our problem into a solution. At the end of the day the important thing is to create a mandatory mechanism - not voluntary - that puts in place the Earth Charter principles that begins with the primary foundation of respect of Earth and life in all its diversity. If we adhere to this, then all decisions that flow from it can only be life-affirming not life-destroying. A leader that puts at the heart of all that she or he does shall have no problem in supporting a law of Ecocide.

By closing the door to dangerous industrial activity, we open the space to allow the innovation and solutions to scale up fast. This can be done. Last year I legally advised ministers of state, UN Ambassadors and governmental lawyers from 54 states after the submission of a Concept Paper into every government in the world.

This law is an idea that refuses to die. And I refuse to let it die. Yours is a country that can give it a platform and take it out to the world. I ask you to help me do that. It needs just one leader to stand up and call for the amendment to the Rome Statute - that's all this needs: when that happens it can be tabled and then all it needs is the support of 2/3rds of the signatories to the Rome Statute. In other words 81 people in the world can make this an international law. The leader that does that

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will go into the books that will be written about this time as the leader who took the bold and brave step. And it is a brave step to stand up and speak out in support of a law that will change the history of humanity.

So I am calling upon Norway to demonstrate leadership. And not just from your Prime Minister but also from you. I invite you to ask yourself, what is the legacy I choose to create in my lifetime? I invite you to dare to be great. The world now, more than ever before needs greatness from each of us.

I believe in something which is bigger than humans but which I find difficult to define. This is for me a quest for Peace. I know it can be done, and I believe this is a country that can make it happen.

It matters not whether you are a Buddhist or an atheist, a humanist or a spiritualist. This is a deeper wisdom: a wisdom that starts from a premise of 'first do no harm.' I invite those who are spiritually engaged to join me in my quest and if you are not, I invite you too. This is a quest to end the era of Ecocide that unties us all.

Arne Naess's Deep Ecology can be called a form of spirituality - a spirituality premised on the greatness of life itself and the sense of intrinsic value of our Earth. It's not about ecosystem services, it's deeper than that - it's about the very guidelines we put in place for making wise decisions through the process of systematic reasoning which results in concrete consequences. That is a spirituality that aligns with my own. I adhere to the Deep Ecology Platform, given voice by Arne Naess and my friend Stephan Harding, a previous Arne Naess Chair. These are their words:

1. All life has value in itself, independent of its usefulness to humans.
2. Richness and diversity contribute to life's well-being and have value in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs in a responsible way.
4. The impact of humans in the world is excessive and rapidly getting worse.
5. Human lifestyles and population are key elements of this impact.
6. The diversity of life, including cultures, can flourish only with reduced human impact.
7. Basic ideological, political, economic and technological structures must therefore change.
8. Those who accept the forgoing points have an obligation to participate in implementing the necessary changes and to do so peacefully and democratically.

During my tenureship here it is my intent to shine a light onto that which we fear to face. For me that is a spiritual endeavour because it calls upon me to look deep into the soul. What is the soul? For me it's the place where I find qualities that speak of courage, love and peace. Just imagine a world where we don't have to think what decision to make, we don't have to ask whether it is destructive. Imagine a world where it just is the norm to make Earth our business. Just imagine - waking up in the knowledge that our time has come.

So here is my invitation to you - to come together with common intent to be idle no more and put in place a law that shall help pave the way to world peace.