

Environmentalists' death inspires look at green stories worldwide

Sharon Abercrombie | Jan. 7, 2013 Eco Catholic

Becky Tarbotton, a bright young light in the international environmental movement, is with us no more. Tarbotton, 39, executive director of the Rainforest Action Network in San Francisco since 2010, died Dec. 26. On vacation with her husband and close friends outside Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, she was caught in the surf. A medical team was unable to revive her.

Tarbotton, a native of Vancouver, British Columbia, once served as an intern for the David Suzuki Foundation, where she helped to draft the first letter from Nobel laureates on the dangers of global warming. Before assuming her post at the Rainforest Action Network, Tarbotton's career spanned years of working with indigenous people in both northern Canada and Ladakh in the Himalayas.

A few months ago, Tarbotton and the Rainforest Action Network's forest team convinced The Walt Disney Co. to eliminate its use of paper produced from the logging of endangered forests in Indonesia. Disney is the largest producer of children's books and magazines in the world.

Tarbotton's untimely death is a tragedy.

In the midst of this terrible sadness over losing such a talented environmental negotiator, it is important that we take her philosophy and her words into our hearts. Tarbotton encourages us not to wilt away, even though the climate change deniers, mountaintop coal producers, natural gas frackers, and the oil companies continue to flourish and profit.

Yes, all of them are still around, she told a group of environmentalists just a few months ago, but so is change: "It is happening all around us. Pay attention to where we are winning. Big things are happening." In a YouTube video of her talk, Tarbotton said victories include 124 coal plants that have been shuttered. Iowa is receiving 20 percent of its energy from renewable resources. These developments come in addition to the Disney victory.

[The Progressive featured](#) [1] more of Tarbotton's passionate, upbeat words this week: "The work of our time is bigger than climate change. We need to be setting our sights higher and deeper. What we're really talking about, if we are honest with ourselves, is transforming everything about the way we live on this planet. We don't always know exactly what it is that creates social change. It takes everything from science all the way to faith, and it's that fertile place right in the middle where exceptional campaigning happens -- and that is where I strive to be."

Yes, Becky, thank you for reminding us that it does take everything from science to faith, and then heeding that fertile place of possibility in the middle, where listening and agreement can happen. All of us -- environmental activists, the indigenous people, clergy, sisters, college students, and individuals working independently to help our planet -- would do well to carry your words into campaigns, pray-ins and individual thinking-outside-the-box projects.

As our tender new year gains its footing, here are some brief stories about projects in the making and about the

people who are advocating for social changes on the environmental front.

A group of interfaith activists from [Interfaith Moral Action on Climate](#) [2], led by Philadelphia rabbi and writer Arthur Waskow, are sponsoring a multifaith "A Pray-in for the Climate" Jan. 15 at the White House.

The activists will urge President Barack Obama to permanently refuse permits for the Keystone XL pipeline. They will ask him to call a national summit conference on the climate crisis, put an end to subsidies to the coal, oil and gas industries, and impose a carbon fee to bring in hundreds of billions of dollars to develop sources for clean-energy jobs.

Fr. Paul Mayer, a former Benedictine monk, co-founder of the [Climate Crisis Coalition](#) [3] and another sponsor of the pray-in, said many religious and faith leaders will participate. They include Franciscan Fr. Louis Vitale, co-founder of the [Nevada Desert Experience](#) [4], an anti-nuclear group; Rev. Bob Edgar, president of [Common Cause](#) [5] and former head of the [National Council of Churches](#) [6]; Rev. Michael Ellik of Judson Memorial Church in New York City; Ibrahim Ramey, [The Muslim American Society](#) [7]; Ted Glick of the [Chesapeake Climate Action Network](#) [8]; and representatives from Occupy Faith/Occupy Sandy.

Individuals and organizations endorsing the action include Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of [NETWORK](#) [9]; Dr. James Hansen, director of the [NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies](#) [10]; Bill McKibben of [350.org](#) [11]; and Chief Oren Lyons, faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan, Onondaga Nation.

On the academic front, Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania and Harvard University in Massachusetts are asking school administrators to divest themselves of their endowments and stocks in fossil fuels, according to a Dec. 4 [New York Times story](#) [12]. Two schools have already done so: Unity College in Maine and Hampshire College in Massachusetts. They have adopted broad investment policies ridding their portfolios of fossil fuel stocks.

"In the near future, the political tide will turn and the public will demand action on climate change," said Stephen Mulkey, Unity College president. "Our students are already demanding action, and we must not ignore them."

Large colleges are not quite so agreeable, according to the *Times*: "Many administrators are viewing the demand skeptically, saying it would undermine their goal of maximum returns in support of education. Fossil fuel companies represent a significant portion of the stock market, comprising nearly 10 percent of the value of the Russell 3000, a broad index of a 3,000 American companies."

Harvard, which has the largest endowment in the country at \$31 billion, does not plan to divest. However, the student body recently voted to ask the school to do so. About half the undergraduates participated in the vote, and 72 percent of them supported the demand.

The divestment project got under way two years ago, when a dozen Swarthmore students saw for themselves the effects of mountaintop removal in Appalachia. When they returned to their campus, they asked the school to get rid of investments in several energy companies. They were unsuccessful, but other schools have since picked up on their idea.

McKibben, an environmental writer and activist who is the founder of 350.org, influenced recent student demands, the *Times* reports. McKibben's goal is to make owning the stocks in fossil fuel companies disreputable

the way owning tobacco stocks has become disreputable in many quarters, causing colleges not to buy them, according to the *Times*.

Recalling Tarbotton's assurances that good things are happening, we next look across the pond to Ireland. A recent [New York Times story](#) [13] by Elisabeth Rosenthal reports that several years ago, the government began imposing a carbon tax on most of the fossil fuels used by homes, offices, vehicles and farms based on each fuel's carbon dioxide emissions. The move immediately drove up prices for oil, natural gas and kerosene. Household trash is now weighed at the curb, and residents have to pay for anything that is not being recycled, according to the *Times*.

The Irish are paying purchase taxes on new cars and yearly registration fees that spike in proportion to the vehicle's emissions. Result: Ireland has seen its emissions drop more than 15 percent since 2008. Before the carbon tax days, the land of St. Patrick had greenhouse gas levels close to those in the United States.

Because of the carbon taxes, the country has begun shifting to greener energy and cars. Renewal energy sources have become more competitive, allowing Ireland's wind energy industry to thrive, Rosenthal writes.

And as for thinking outside the box, a Detroit entrepreneur is buying up acres of abandoned lots in the city and planting thousands of trees on them. John Hantz, owner of Hantz Farms, wants to plant at least 15,000 oaks and sugar maples on about 140 acres to stop urban blight.

Hantz is paying \$300 for each lot, [NPR reported](#) [14] Dec. 21. But not everyone is thrilled with the deal. Objectors who spoke against the project at a public hearing said the city should have put the land into a public trust instead. But Margaret Dewar, an urban-planning professor at the University of Michigan, said it is possible to do that as well. She said there aren't enough groups to handle the massive amount of vacant lots but said she thinks there are plenty more opportunities for unorthodox ideas about what to with Detroit's most abundant resource -- its vacant lots.

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Links:

[1] <http://progressive.org/in-praise-of-environmentalist-becky-tarbotton>

[2] <http://www.interfaithactiononclimatechange.org/>

[3] <http://www.climatecrisiscoalition.org/>

[4] <http://www.nevadadesertexperience.org/>

[5] <http://www.commoncause.org/>

[6] <http://www.nccusa.org/>

[7] <http://www.masnet.org/main/>

[8] <http://www.chesapeakeclimate.org/>

[9] <http://www.networklobby.org/>

[10] <http://www.giss.nasa.gov/>

[11] <http://350.org/>

[12] <https://www.ncronline.org/Harvard%2520University>

[13] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/28/science/earth/in-ireland-carbon-taxes-pay->

off.html?ref=elisabethrosenthal

[14] <http://www.npr.org/2012/12/21/167807136/an-urban-tree-farm-grows-in-detroit>