Climate Brewing | Rod Downing and Climate Advocacy

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SPEAKERS
Susan Oxley, Rod Downing

Susan Oxley 00:27
Welcome to Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Susan Oxley, from Seattle, Washington, the United States of America. And this is the series “Climate Brewing.” Today, I'm interviewing my good friend, Rod, Rod Downing, who’s been working all his adult life to mitigate global warming.

Rod’s the chairman of the North American climate justice team, on which I also serve. And he's been a student of the environment for the past 40 years, witnessing the increase of global warming, the disruption of climate patterns, and then the development now of a present climate emergency. And as a dedicated advocate for change, Rod has sponsored political actions, taught classes, and written resolutions for the Community of Christ World Conference. He's joined demonstrations and marches through the years, he's well versed in history and justice issues. And he joins us now from Vancouver, British Columbia, to share his journey toward becoming a climate activist.

So, Rod, I'm going to start with a very simple question. When did you first become aware of climate change and the impact it could have on the planet? And what were you doing at the time?

Rod Downing 01:48
Yes, well, first of all, thanks for that kind introduction. Anyway, glad to be here. And as long as people listening don't focus on me, but on the topic, I'm content to keep going. And--because it's a critically important topic for basically all humanity, and the entire health of the globe.

So where did I start? You are right, I've spent several decades now in various issues and environmental issues, where one-- that go back. Well, I guess, as an older teen is when I started my very first thing. But even the other topics that I became involved in (peace, justice, human rights, and then of course, all the environmental issues of the da) I always sort of saw them as interrelated and tended to deal with them in that capacity. So then if you take simply the environmental issue and say, okay, it started out as pollution--at least when I start started out, they didn't even have recycling. That's kind of where I started: in a warehouse breaking glass bottles, because there was no automated recycling. If you're going to do it, you had to get a group of people together and get barrels, enough barrels of bottles together all smashed up and off to wherever.

I'm quite clear where I started that. And I'm quite clear where I became a… moved from sort of those practical things like breaking bottles or whatever, into more political activist work and things like that and into other aspects.

But when it comes to climate change, I simply cannot pin a date. All I know, is that by the 1990s, which is when I was on the board of an international development organization, I mean, maybe started in the late 80s. I was fully aware of climate change by then and we were grappling with how, you know, they were talking about governments, were talking about cap and trade systems and things like that. And we were trying to decide whether that made any sense or really was going to be solving, you know.

So, by 1990, the U N. had created the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. If you know the UN, they love acronyms. So that became the IPCC. And that body was responsible for putting out a report specifically focused on climate change every five years. Now it became five years and six and seven, so it didn't quite keep to schedule. But-- So I was, yeah, I was clearly focused on that type of stuff by that point.

Right.

So, for instance, in the late '70s, and early '80s, I spent a lot of time with clearcut logging issues because I live in British Columbia, BC, the West Coast of Canada, which is a lot of rainforest areas there, so a lot of old growth, and a big lumber industry there. And it was very clear that they, you know, the companies--while of course, they said they'd look after their workers--they were logging at a rate that was not sustainable. So eventually, they'd just leave the workers and leave.

And more into the activist work: anyone sort of my vintage might remember the War of the Woods in around 1980, which became the big global outcry over clearcut logging. I mean, it was happening all over. And it's just every once in a while some event focuses world attention. And that was in BC.

And because I was living in the West, but was born in the East, here's where some inclinations about the climate change first arose. As you know, I was born and raised in the East of Canada. And we were originally in an area that was a real snow belt. So you'd get piles of snow every winter. But as I went back--because I still had family back there, I would go back every couple of years or whatever--I noticed the changes, and they became fairly dramatic. Yeah, it's like a completely different area now. So there were a number of changes that--climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe, I love her wording on it--is, well, the climate change is--I don't know--it's Global Weirding. That's for sure! The climate is getting more and more weird!

Susan Oxley 08:05
And so how did you begin getting involved in political action around climate change?

Rod Downing 08:10
I spent some time (because I have a Master's in Science degree) it was no trouble for me to kind of follow the science. And out here in British Columbia, it's always had a very high activist population. So it wasn't difficult to join in on protests that had already been happening. And in fact, some of the groups

were groups that I supported financially. And I mentioned that simply, as you know, without these nonprofits doing some of the background research work and things like that,(and then other groups, you know, providing these other opportunities--and it can be letter writing and a variety of things, but it can also be protest) we don't make a lot of progress. And what we're up against is multinational huge piles of money to deflect and obscure things.

So, anyway, beyond that, then I got involved in some of the local groups here. Because, again, BC having not only the forests involved, not only were we full of unceded indigenous territories and claims, not only did we have mining, but oil pipelines were always a key issue. Alberta, the province next to us is sort of landlocked. So the only way they can get their oil out is through pipelines, and they just had one small one to the West Coast and they wanted it expanded. So there were incredible tugs of war over who would or who wouldn't get to send oil. And anyway, there were a couple of pipelines. One, we did actually stop it. One, we delayed it. We thought we had stopped it, but the government picked up the ball and sort of completed it. And actually, this is good timing. Just last week, the first tankard started to fill up with oil. So, so that's it. That's just a picture of some of the things that many of us over here on the West Coast have been concerned about.

Susan Oxley 11:22
Let me go back a moment to the War of the Woods.

Rod Downing 11:31
if you know, BC, it's the Tofino area Clayoquot, it's also called Clayoquot Sound, and that's where the actual timber was being taken.

Susan Oxley 11:46
Okay. And were you actually part of t that movement?

Rod Downing 11:51
Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, in fact, I was part of the pre-movement. As a matter of fact, one of the forest companies even went under before it got to Clayoquot, to the War the Woods. They--but yes, I had been protesting a few years before that, and then into that time.

Susan Oxley 12:26
I'm just curious, how was protesting at that time, different than it is today?

Rod Downing 12:33
Oh, that's a, that's actually a very good question. And this a good one to look at it on. Alright, so War, the Woods, 1980. By and large, it started just before the summer. Could have been coincidence? Or maybe not, that that happens be when university students are out. This was not on the Mainland of British Columbia, but on Vancouver Island. So we had to take a ferry over. So not the easiest thing to get to, and then drive for a few hours. But they set up a camp there that had--eventually would have, I don't know, a couple 100 people all the time, sometimes more, sometimes less. And they blocked the main road in, you know. Just, you know, grabbing arms or whatever is the way it started or, or various other techniques. And eventually, the company involved got an injunction from the courts to stop that

and, and nobody would. So then the arrests began. And I'd say just about every day, or always two or three, usually a dozen or more people would get arrested. By the end of the summer, there were between eight to 900 people arrested that had been arrested for this.

By the end of the summer. I was getting worried because I knew that a lot of these were students and a lot of them were going to go back. So it was quite an interesting coincidence that I was getting ready to head over because I knew the numbers were going to be depleted again. So when they basically announced victory--that they had made their point--a negotiated settlement that prevented clearcutting.

You said, “What's it like then compared to now?” So fast forward to last… this past… well, between 2013 [ed: Rod checked the date later and the Fairey Creek protest occurred in 2023]. Still on Vancouver Island, but this is on the very south of Vancouver Island, another old growth forest area. And another logging company wanted to cut down some of the old growth in that area. And it was on average--sorry, it was on First Nations’ territory, called Fairey Creek area. You know, they… they… protesters would block the road. I didn't participate in this one, and the reason was because there wasn't a unanimity amongst the First Nations’ people whose property this was. About whether, you know, whether there should be a protest or not.

But there were over 1000 people this time, so even more than Clayoquot Sound. The protesting tactics had become much more sophisticated. There at times would be (to block the road in) could be people suspending themselves in a way that if you weren't careful, they would drop like--I don't know--50 feet, or no, meters? Feet. Yeah, let's say 50 feet, you know, and possibly be killed, or at least badly injured. So that was one of their blocking tactics, the other innovative one--

Susan Oxley 17:10
[interrupting] I'm sorry, I don't understand. They would suspend themselves from what?

Rod Downing 17:14
Oh! They would rig poles, and you know, there would be a canopy forest as well that you could, you know, rake things to and from it would depend on the location. But the point is that they couldn't clear the road without disturbing and possibly knocking these people off of this, these suspended situations, and thereby injuring or possibly even killing them. So that was one tactic. That had been used before.

But a new one was to dig a hole. Think of your arm. Dig a hole bigger than your arm, but all the way down, fill it with sort of a metal casing so that your arm can stay in there, and then put concrete around there. So that it is… everything is secured. And the only way that you can be cleared is in essence to dig that whole thing out, which would take—I mean, I have no idea what it would take--but no easy task.

In 1980, overall, I think you'd say the police are--and of course exceptions, always exceptions--that police might drag someone away, but they wouldn't, you know, you wouldn't end up with possible broken bones or anything like that out of the ordeal or a kicked-in face, or things like that. Whereas this time in 2013 [Ed: actually 2023] because it was more out of sight, [and] the First Nations largely barred camera crews and things like that. So, you know, you couldn't see everything that was going on. But—oh, Lordy, it was a lot more violent!

So those were two of the big differences. Simply the level of confrontation was on a completely different scale on both sides. But yeah, and in the end, Fairey Creek was not a success, from an ecological stance, you know, from an environmental standpoint. Now is it over? Not necessarily over. We'll see what this next year--what this next spring and fall comes. But for the time being, yeah. That's where it sits. So yes, big differences. Yeah.

Susan Oxley 20:21
How did it come to a conclusion? Fairey Creek. It's not over, but there was a cessation of protesting on the property, right. Yes.

Rod Downing 20:33
Yes. And my understanding was that the First Nations peoples just eventually told the protesters to stop while they try and deal with the situation within their own community. Is where things sit for the time being.

Why would the First Nations not be in unanimously opposed? Well, there you go. It's not the only place that's like that. In one case, it's the traditional leaders are somewhat at odds. And this is another area are somewhat at odds with the other aspect of governing, which is where you elect your band members. And yeah, you can get conflicts there.

Susan Oxley 21:47
If you could summarize, perhaps, a couple of key things that you learned in your years of protest and advocacy, from the 1980s to now, what are some key learnings that you have had, that you have found?

Rod Downing 22:08
First of all, there's a variety of, I guess, I'd say a variety of tools in the toolbox. And one of the--always in need of discernment--is, which are the appropriate tools at a given time? There are various stages in trying to bring about change. And at each stage, there are a variety of roles that can be appropriate if they're coordinated properly, and roles that would might also set things backwards. Trying to get all that aligned properly and correct is, yeah, is a discerning… one of those discerning issues. But for sure, there's a variety of roles. There isn't just one. There's never a magic bullet. But if the issue is of importance, then the more tools that we have at our disposal, the better off we are.

And that's where, you know, this sense of Unity in Diversity, one of our enduring principles, to me is so important because it says, “Well, you know, my strength may be in phoning people. So I'll pick up the phone/” Or my strength may be in writing a letter. Or my strength may be in simply talking about it. Talking about an issue can help. You know, it just helps develop awareness and with awareness generally comes, you know, a little better insight into things. And of course, non violence. I can't… Nonviolence is of course, a given when you're getting into possible strategies of protests and things. It can be as simple as donating to a cause, taking a look, making sure it's a reputable one, and donating to it.

Susan Oxley 24:41
Wonderful, thank you so much for sharing some of your journey and some of your insights about protest. I would like to continue the conversation in a Part Two, and talk about how you and the church managed this journey between the two of you, and the way in which you influenced the church and the church influenced you. So thank you very much. I appreciate you very much, Rod. And we will close this off for now.

Rod Downing 25:16
Well, thanks. Thanks for having me. And I appreciate all the efforts that are made to help make the world a better place.

Susan Oxley 25:18
Thank you, Rod.