

Climate Brewing | Campground Climate Safety and Renewal

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SPEAKERS

Susan Oxley, Joan Thompson

Susan Oxley 00:27

Welcome to Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host Susan Oxley, from Seattle, Washington in the United States. This is the series "Climate Brewing." And today I'm interviewing my good friend Joan Thompson, from Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, an hour west of Toronto. I have known Joan for many, many years, I'd say at least 25. And we worked together in a variety of ministerial roles early on. And now, we are both members of the North American Climate Justice Team. Joan tells me she's learned a lot on the North American Climate Justice Team. We're going to share a little bit of some of the things that she has learned and become interested in during the three years, four years that we've been working. So welcome, Joan.

Joan Thompson 01:24

It's good to be here, Susan, and it's good to be back with you again.

Susan Oxley 01:28

Well, I'm so glad to have you here. Joan, as you know, we're moving into the camping season in the Northern Hemisphere, with youth camps and reunions; and we've been getting ready for reunions in various places. The reunion materials for this year focus on the environment and climate change. It's called "Heal the Earth." And as we start attending events at campgrounds, and once again assessing what our campground needs are, I'd like to talk about the vulnerability of our campgrounds to the effects of climate change. Can you share with me some of the things that you see in terms of how vulnerable our campgrounds are in the face of the current climate emergency and changes in climate patterns and weather?

Joan Thompson 02:30

Thanks, Susan. Yes. When we started looking at campgrounds, the climate team, way back in March of 2021, we did a webinar focused on the kind of unique and different things, several campgrounds, several mission centers, several congregations are doing to reduce their carbon footprint--the typical kinds of things--and also to increase their biodiversity. The typical things that we think about when

we're thinking about how to use our land, and how to be good stewards. Then in September of 2022, we did a couple of sessions called "Climate Crises and Sacred Spaces—Our Campgrounds." And the team did a lot of research into the various risks our campgrounds are facing. It was really eye opening. We had no idea of the kinds of risks that are starting to be evident now and will be increasingly a factor in the future. So let me just name a few.

The first one that comes to people's minds will be heat. The number of extreme heat days is increasing, the temperatures are increasing, the heat related deaths are increasing. We're at half a million people a year and climbing from heat-related deaths. And we tend to think that those are in underdeveloped countries, but they're happening everywhere.

Then we've got the risk on our coastal properties of sea level rise that... even on the inland properties, the risk of floods is increasing. And at the same time, the risk of drought is increasing. So that's all going to affect our campgrounds.

And then there's wind. Winds are stronger than they used to be. And so we're seeing more wind damage, more trees coming down and wind storms, things like that.

And then the big one, in my mind, is fire. Almost all of our campgrounds are surrounded by trees, and the risk of forest fire and local fires is increasing. Along with fire, comes smoke, and we saw last summer how far the smoke can go from forest fires raging in the north. Well, just the smoke itself can be toxic. And the chemicals that are sprayed to fight those forest fires bond with the ash, and create toxic particulates that are very small, get into people's lungs, and cause very serious lung damage. So we've got a lot of issues facing our campgrounds.

Susan Oxley 05:56

Yes, we do. When you name them like that, it just seems overwhelming. But even now, what can some of the camp boards and managers and directors do to help make our campgrounds more ecologically safe and resilient?

Joan Thompson 06:13

That's a huge topic. I think the first thing is to get educated and to become better educated about the risks and the options for mitigating the risks. For instance, in Canada, we have an organization called The Intact--that's I-N-T-A-C-T, The Intact Center for Climate Action. And it works with universities, think tanks, government. And it's produced a number of brochures that are available to download for free on all of the different risks, and how to make your property--whether it's a homeowner property, or commercial property or larger property--as resilient as possible. So that's a great place to start: a great overview.

For instance, for the fire risk, talking to the local fire department. If you've got a department of the forestry, you know, in your local area, in your state or province, talk to them. Talk to indigenous elders if you can learn where and how to contact them in your local area. Because First Nations people have been caring for this landscape for thousands, tens of thousands of years. And they've learned a lot,

they have a lot of wisdom that we've ignored up until now. And so there's a lot of information that can be found in terms of what needs to be done in the long run.

And then people can start developing a plan or a long-range plan on how to, you know, how to make some changes to the campground.

One of the fastest things that we can do, especially in the camps that have the highest heat risk, is to look at changing our programs. One of the simplest things I've come across is the idea of reversing the order of what we normally do. Camps I've been at, study in the morning and play in the afternoon. And so people are indoors in the morning and outdoors in the afternoon. As the heat goes up, let's reverse that. Let's do all of our outdoor things in the morning or in the later evening and do our indoor activities in the afternoon.

Another thing that can be done quickly: some of our campgrounds (the buildings) are air conditioned, some of them they're not. But increasing insulation in the ceiling or putting insulation in the ceiling can help to cool the buildings using sails. A system of sails where you want to be outside or even over the top of the building can also help to reduce the heat in the buildings. So there's some relatively inexpensive and fast things that can be done to start protecting people. [Ed. Note: "sails" are also called "awnings," "sun shades," and "canopies."]

Have a good supply of masks. I know masks are very controversial. But when we get into smoke from forest fires, it's a good idea to have masks.

Susan Oxley 09:56

If I were a Director right now, what kinds of things would you suggest I do before reunion begins--say in three weeks--to be ready for heat-related difficulties among the people.

Joan Thompson 10:15

Contact your public health department and get some recommendations from them. A lot of cooling stations, a lot of water stations. A lot more indoor activities where it's cooler.

I was just reading a newsletter from Katharine Hayhoe. She's one of our favorite climate scientists. And in one of her most recent newsletters, she talks about the fact that she lives in Texas. And they're used to heat in Texas, and they've never had heatstroke. And in the last year, every single member of her family has suffered from heatstroke, some of them multiple times. So I don't think most of us are aware of the difference between a normally hot day when we feel hot, but everything's fine. And just that couple of degrees hotter, when we're more apt to get heatstroke.

Susan Oxley 11:24

Yeah, and heat stroke doesn't just go away, once you drink some water and rest for an hour. Heatstroke quite often requires several days to actually get over to recuperate, and you're more prone to heatstroke after you've had it once.

Joan Thompson 11:43

I might suggest also opening the pool multiple times a day, rather than just once a day.

Susan Oxley 11:53

So is there anything else that you wanted to share with us in terms of, like, floods and wind and things like that? Are there things that campground boards or managers need to be thinking of, to prepare for that kind of disaster?

Joan Thompson 12:15

Yes, winds and fire go together in some ways. You want to be making sure--very first thing is that you've got an escape route, if there's a fire.

One of the exercises I've done is to visually go through the way out of camp, driving down that road and imagining every tree beside the road on fire. And the winds whipping it up because forest fires create their own winds. So if the trees are too close to the road, if the tree canopy grows over the road, imagine that all on fire and you trying to get your family out safely. So...

Susan Oxley

Horrifying!

Joan Thompson

Horrifying! Terrifying!

One of the parts of our webinars back in September, when Paul Bethel was researching campgrounds in the West, he came across a logging camp close to where our Camp Buckhorn is, that almost could not get out during the forest fire because the road was blocked. And they did not have a secondary exit. So that would be another recommendation is look for an emergency secondary exit even if you need to coordinate that with your neighbors. "If your lodge is on fire, you guys can come out, you know, through our property and we'll do the same."

And then clearing the trees and clearing the brush along your roadways. I mean, I love walking along a tree-shaded road. I love it when the trees or the leaves are overhead. It's just so beautiful. But if there's a fire...

Yeah, the risk of fire is increasing because most forest fires are caused by lightning strikes. And lightning happens everywhere. And so, as we have more dead trees and dead branches in our forested and wooded areas, the risk is there for all of us. So that would be the first thing I would recommend is to make sure you've got safe escape routes in case of a fire.

Susan Oxley 15:08

Okay. Thank you very much.

Joan Thompson 15:10

Susan. Susan, you also asked about wind, and I meant to talk about wind because that's important.

The velocity of wind storms is increasing, and wind storms are being felt over larger areas. Okay. So people are having tornadoes where they've never had tornadoes. But the big one is hurricane-strength winds. They're going a lot farther inland than they used to, covering a lot more territory.

Well, we want to have trees around our main buildings, they're a great source of cooling. But we also want those trees to not come down on those buildings in a windstorm. And the way to manage that is to have them shaped. We learned this a couple of years ago, when there was what's called a derecho. [A derecho is a long-lived, strong and straight, sustained wind of 58 mph that affects a wide territory.] It went through southwestern Ontario, and took out a whole lot of trees. We lost a spruce tree in our backyard. There were five trees come down on our street, in about a sixty second period. And one of the things we learned after that was that most trees can survive those kind of wind storms, if their crown area is thin enough and if they're shaped properly--the limbs are shaped properly, so there's no crisscrossing limbs going through there. They're shaped more like a natural fountain, so that the wind can easily go through there. And I would highly recommend campgrounds to look at the shaping and possible re-shaping and pruning of trees around their main buildings.

Susan Oxley 17:13

I believe that's called "windsailing." And professional arborists are very good at assessing how to windsail the canopy of the tree. Even though it would cost a little bit of money to take care of that on trees that are right around buildings at the campground, it's a lot less expensive than trying to replace the buildings.

Joan Thompsons

It certainly is. Or the people who are in the building.

Susan Oxley

Or the people who are in the buildings that can't be replaced.

Joan Thompson

Yes.

Susan Oxley

So yeah, thank you for adding that piece of information. I appreciate it. Okay.

Joan Thompson 17:52

We went to a maple sugar bush this spring. [In this context, "bush" refers to an uncultivated wooded area.] Our daughter has a new housemate who's from the Philippines who had never seen maple sugar, maple syrup or anything like that. So we took her to a maple sugar bush, which is basically a large woodlot on a farm.

And I was impressed with what good shape the woodlot was in. There were no dead trees, there was no low growing brush. The trees were well spaced. Every single winter they go in and they take out dead trees. They trim the brush back, that, the low growing brush back. And they thin the trees to make sure that light can get in to the ground around the tree canopy so that the trees remain healthy.

That's the kind of thing that would be ideal for us to do around our campgrounds. It can be done in cooperation, again, with other neighbors. We don't all need to have the equipment, if one person has this piece of equipment and another person has that piece of equipment. And we can even run camps in the winter training people on how to thin out the woods to keep them healthier, to minimize their risk of catching fire in the first place.

So I was just pleased when we went to this woodlot--that somebody who's doing this commercially was able to reinforce everything we've been learning about the importance of managing it for fire safety--especially that also the health of the trees, all of the brush areas that we have around us. It would take some creative thinking and brainstorming to come up with efficient ways to manage that for our campgrounds, people, but it could be done.

Susan Oxley 20:08

Sounds wonderful, thank you. Let's shift a little bit now. One of the ideas that we have come across in our webinars and our research is the possibility of making whatever land we have available--that we have access to--more ecologically sound, more of a center of restoration and renewal.

Joan Thompson 20:37

Oh, absolutely. One of our recent webinars was on permaculture. That was in March of this year. Kelda Lorax, from Oregon, did a presentation for us on the concept of permaculture. It's a fascinating concept, that's basically designing your landscape to be resilient. So it increases your resilience by following the ecological principles--looking at taking a really deep look at your land in terms of where the sun comes up, where the sun goes down, what's sunny, what's shady, what the elevation is, what are the high areas, what are the low areas--and coming up with a design, working with your existing buildings, to help make that area higher in biodiversity, but also ecologically sustainable and usable for all life, human and animal life within the area. So that would be a great place [to start] once you've done your research to find out what your risks are, and what kind of things need to happen over the next 10 or so years. When you're ready to start your long-term plan, long-term design, bring in a permaculture design expert, and have a look at that.

Susan Oxley 22:21

And one of the ideas that came out of that, that I was interested in, was creating a food--what do they call it?--a food forest, along one of the well-traveled trails on your campground and intentionally plant bushes, herbs, vegetables along there that people could graze on, when they actually are on the campgrounds. They could snack on stuff that they would pick up along the trail as they move from one part of the campground to another. And so for instance, you could plant some berry bushes, you could plant some small strawberry bushes low to the ground, you could plant snap peas or pea pods. People could just pluck them and enjoy them along the way. And it would turn that area of the campgrounds

into a pleasant and functional produce area that--when people weren't snacking on them--could actually be harvested and used in the kitchen.

Joan Thompson 23:28

I think that's a great idea too, and it can be visually attractive and low maintenance. And they can also help feed the animals, the local animals too. So we need to be generous and sharing. In the campgrounds that I'm currently at, someone has planted a lot of lilies, around the tree areas, around the main buildings. And they're edible lilies. And so when they flower, the cooks use them as garnishes for salads. And the taste of that actually the tastes pretty good. So there's a lot of interesting ways to make your landscape design beautiful and functional at the same time.

Susan Oxley 24:31

What a great idea! So what's keeping us from pursuing those kinds of ideas besides the fact that we don't think of them! But what else is keeping us from doing these kinds of things to make our campgrounds safer, more functional and more ecologically renewing?

Joan Thompson 24:51

I think that most campground boards the people are currently overwhelmed with recovering from the effects of COVID, getting camps fully operational, again, dealing with, in many cases, decreased numbers of campers and decreased numbers of volunteers. And so that's just the reality that people are overwhelmed. There's opportunity that can reduce the overwhelm of looking at this.

One of the things I've thought about is, many of the places where we have campgrounds, our neighbors are in the same boat, and they don't know it either. Our neighbors are also surrounded by heavily treed areas, and they're also facing the same risks. And so there's an opportunity here, which I think is a missional opportunity to invite the neighbors in for presentations. Bring in speakers for presentations around these subjects, and talk to the neighbors, and brainstorm and see how we can help each other. I think that there's a real opportunity there.

There's also a missional opportunity, as we look at making our campgrounds as resilient as possible and as disaster proof as possible, to make them emergency gathering centers for the neighborhood. So I think that that would help if people on the board know, but they don't have to do it all themselves, be part of a neighborhood team.

Susan Oxley 26:59

Yes, and if those of us who enjoy the campgrounds would commit to giving a little bit more time and attention to the campgrounds as volunteers that would help, too.

Joan Thompson 27:11

And we could sponsor a kind of camps, like work camps at where we not only-- where we invite the neighbors to come and people, you know, local people and get the theory. Well, let's go out to our bush lot here and practice. Practice by cleaning up this section, and then we'll all get good at it.

Susan Oxley 27:34

It sounds good! Is there anything else you would like to share with us before we close?

Joan Thompson 27:42

It's all doable. I think that it's all manageable, if we realize that we don't have to do it all at once. We don't have to do it all today. If we're... Most of our campgrounds have aging infrastructure, that's going to have to be replaced at some point. And so if we look at as we need to replace things, what the best way to do it, to make it as environmentally friendly as possible, but also as people friendly as possible in terms of surviving and thriving in a radically different climate than what we've known before. That taking it in stages and in small bites makes it doable.

And if we're involving the neighbors in the conversation, I don't mean just the immediate neighbors, but hopefully, you know, broad area of people. It's also being missional in that it's getting us to know and and it's possibly developing and increasing our resource base and our—possibly--even our pool of volunteer base. So I would just encourage boards to get started at looking at the threats with their local area. And of course, the Climate Team is always ready and able and willing to help any board that would like us to come and talk to them or talk to them by Zoom and help them assess where they need to be looking at.

Susan Oxley 29:33

Thank you so much, Joan. It's been a joy talking to you and I appreciate your wisdom and all the research you've done. And I enjoy having a chance to do a podcast with you. Thanks very much.

Joan Thompson 29:48

Thank you, Susan. It's been a delight for me as well.