In this passionate interview, co-founder and Executive Director of the Network Osprey Orielle Lake explains why it is so crucial to ensure women uphold a strong social, political and economic stance in the face of climate change and environmental degradation.
The International Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN) aims to empower women to take social and environmental action against climate change and ecosystem degradation. By what means do you hope to achieve these objectives?

If we do not change our course, we are headed toward a potential 4 °C or more rise in global temperature over the coming decades and unprecedented havoc for present and future generations. We are finding that women are no longer willing to stand by when so much is at stake. International commitments and national responses to runaway climate change and the root causes of the crisis have not been equivalent to the escalating urgency of the situation.

WECAN provides a holistic, solutions-based approach to climate justice. We believe in a bottom-up approach coupled with strategic mobility building and the involvement of women in diverse sectors through focused political, economic and social advocacy, as well as region-specific climate training. The Network aims to significantly expand decision makers’ awareness and understanding of the realities of climate change and the urgent need to take firm and effective policy actions, and implement on-the-ground solutions commensurate with what nature tells us.

What do you see as WECAN’s work trajectory?

The Network is calling for deep systemic change to uphold democratic governance and economic structures that are fair and just, and which operate in accordance with the laws of the natural world. In this transitional age, everything about how we are living with each other and the environment must change. It is important to understand that we are part of social and environmental movements much greater than ourselves, our communities or countries. People around the world who are taking action are part of our planet’s ‘immune system’, which is rising up against injustices that are destroying our Earth and all life as we know it.

Four Guiding Principles underscore the vision of WECAN’s dedication to climate justice: the Rights of Women; the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; the Rights of Nature; and the Rights of Future Generations.

Why are women valuable players?

Women already play a key role in food production, water and resource management and household consumption choices. Emerging evidence indicates that women’s leadership is essential to reducing carbon emissions and fostering environmental protection. Between 60 to 80 per cent of all household food production in developing countries is carried out by women. When women farmers are fully empowered we will see reductions in the carbon footprint of our global food system. Additionally, the UN recognises that sustainable water resources management depends on engaging women at all levels of decision making and implementation.

Women in North America determine 80 per cent of all consumer purchases. Imagine how that market power could be mobilised to significantly reduce carbon emissions through purchasing choices, including eliminating fossil fuels. Imagine women demanding a change to endless economic growth models and current consumption patterns.

Politically, women’s decision making has important implications for climate change. A study of 130 countries found that those with higher female parliamentary representation are more prone to ratify international environmental treaties.

Finally, studies conducted by the UN show that in both developed and developing countries, wherever women are empowered through education and jobs, economies improve, populations stabilise and community health improves. These conditions are essential for environmental and sustainability solutions to take hold.

Collaboration is a huge part of WECAN’s remit. How do you facilitate such partnerships?

One of the most effective and productive ways we have facilitated partnerships and collaborations is through high-impact, face-to-face events that are amplified through online platforms or training. We have found that it is very beneficial to meet in person, at least in the initial stages. Like in any field of work, building relationships is essential, and I will add, one of the most joyful parts of the work!

Which issues will take centre stage at WECAN in 2014?

On 31 January 2014, the US Department of State released its final Keystone XL pipeline Environmental Impact Statement, which will enable TransCanada to extract an additional 830,000 barrels of tar sands crude per day, equal to an additional 181 million metric tons of CO₂ per year, 37 million more cars on the road or 51 new coal plants. We simply can’t afford to do this.

President Barack Obama has said that he would only approve the Keystone XL tar sands oil pipeline if it does not ‘significantly exacerbate the problem of carbon pollution’. We must therefore urge him to make the right decision and reject the proposal. WECAN, along with many allies, is fighting against Keystone XL and supporting frontline communities that are impacted by the project and its associated infrastructure.

Educing the future

WECAN is launching a new training series in May, focusing on the following themes:

- Why women are key to climate change and sustainability solutions: how women are impacted and what they can do – WECAN will focus on knowledge, communication skills, design and implementation of regional climate action plans – specifically solutions in relation to water, energy, food and carbon emission reductions

- Advocacy efforts regionally and internationally: a rights-based approach to solutions and systemic change – Particularly, the Network will focus on ‘rights of nature’ advocacy

- What does transitioning to a clean and just energy future mean in your region: what women can do personally in their daily lives and communities – WECAN discuss on-the-ground and policy solutions, collaborating with others to implement action plans from solar and wind businesses to climate responsive organic farming, from carbon fee advocacy to protecting rainforests.

Training also includes reconnecting with nature and understanding the vital importance of living within the Earth’s carrying capacity.
Global gathering

WECAN recently organised and hosted the International Women’s Earth and Climate Summit, which took place on 20-23 September 2013 in New York. The working Summit included 100+ women leaders from around the world who gathered for over three days of dialogue and deliberation to create a climate change and sustainable solutions action agenda. Delegates to the Summit included grassroots activists, economists, scientists, businesswomen, indigenous leaders, policy makers, farmers, faith leaders and culture shapers from the Global South and North.

The result

The Summit led to an unprecedented collaboration of women who are passionately dedicated to the development of a clean energy future. The Summit produced two critical documents:

1. The WECAN Climate Declaration ‘Women of the World Call for Urgent Action on Climate Change & Sustainability Solutions’ – which is being distributed worldwide by allied networks and is serving as a powerful organising tool.

2. The Women’s Climate Action Agenda (WCAA) – a highly researched, detailed road map supporting solutions that keep global temperatures from rising no more than 2 °C, addressing policy, local solutions and cultural transformation. The report is set for release later this year.

Perfect timing

WECAN has received many requests to organise a summit focused on US mobilisation and plans to host one mid-2015. This summit will explore national policy and impacts on the Global South, local solutions, new economic structures and movement building as well as focusing on how its impact can be felt at the 2015 UN Climate Negotiations in Paris (Conference of Parties, COP 21).

Key actions:

- Commitment to the transition to a clean energy economy, including electrical generation from 100 per cent renewables.
- Cancellation of further fossil fuel development, including Canada’s tar sands.
- Call for carbon fees and a financial transaction tax.
- Respect for traditional ecological knowledge from Indigenous peoples.
- Protection of the world’s oceans and forests.

Are you currently working with, or looking to develop any exciting projects through the Network?

WECAN’s new Women for Forests Program involves three regions: the Amazon rainforest, the Canadian boreal forest and the Congo rainforest. 15 per cent of annual CO₂ emissions are due to deforestation. Every year 61,700 m², mostly natural tropical and rainforests, are cut and deforested; a single tree can absorb as much as 48 lb of CO₂ per year, sequestering one tonne of CO₂ over 40 years; approximately 80 per cent of the Earth’s biodiversity is located on Indigenous peoples’ lands. For these reasons WECAN considers forest protection and respect for Indigenous peoples and their rights a top priority. Protecting the biodiversity of forests is one way we can protect the web of life for future generations. We are dedicated to supporting Indigenous women who live in these forests and are fighting to protect their traditional communities and forests. Many of these ecosystems are threatened by oil extraction plans; therefore protecting forests has the additional benefit of avoiding fossil fuel emissions through deforestation.

What is the main purpose of WECAN’s Online Solutions Forum?

The Forum was launched on International Women’s Day (8 March 2013) for participants to connect with each other around the world; share ideas, projects, sustainable businesses, research and campaigns; discuss solutions to climate change and sustainability; and cross-pollinate collaborative ideas from different sectors and garner support.

It is a site to share solutions and/or implement planning for local communities, for example: clean energy technologies, local agroecology, seed saving, anti-fracking campaigns and new Earth-respecting cultural narratives. We have been deeply touched by the remarkable efforts of women around the world who care for their families and communities under extreme environmental hardships and injustices. We imagine what can happen if these women garner support and a seat at decision-making tables, and our goal at WECAN is to ensure this is implemented.

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