



# **EXTRACTION:**

**ART ON THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS**

**MICHAEL TRAYNOR**



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*Preview of a Glorious Ruckus*

MICHAEL TRAYNOR

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*I am the Change*, installation by Jetsonorama. Photograph by Ben Knight.

## INTRODUCTION

At this critical time of climate change and unsustainable extraction of natural resources, Peter Koch, a printer, publisher and fine artist, has conceived of *EXTRACTION: Art on the Edge of the Abyss*, (<https://www.extractionart.org>). He, Edwin Dobb, a writer and teacher of environmental stories, and a growing group of allies, have launched this inspiring project. They aim to create “a multi-layered, cross-institutional, trans-border multimedia ruckus over the single most urgent planetary concern of our time—the social, cultural, and environmental costs of unbridled globalized extractive industry, including the negative effects of climate change; the deterioration of land, water, and air; the devastation and displacement of poor, minority, and indigenous communities; and much else.”

Leaders of the *Extraction Art* project, Peter and Edwin are natives of Montana, Peter from Missoula and Edwin from Butte. While living in California now, they maintain strong Montana ties. They are setting the stage for a constellation of events in 2021 and have already enlisted confirmed participants from numerous and diverse museums and galleries, curators, artists, photographers, writers, libraries and rare book departments, organizations and publishers, and a team of advisers. I learned of the project from Malcolm Margolin, author of the classic, *The Ohlone Way*, leader of the California

Institute for Community, Art and Nature, and founder and president for forty years of Heyday, a nonprofit publisher on whose board I serve.

The project will publish periodic newsletters and sequence and publish anticipatory documents/manifestos/images heralding a series of artistic, musical, and dramatic events and exhibitions. It is also starting to make advance arrangements for those events. Jane Hirshfield, poet, author, and confirmed participant, is preparing a forthcoming poetry reading at the San Francisco public library.

It is human nature and a necessity to consume resources to survive. It is a human frailty and not a necessity to do so unsustainably. The extraction problem is not confined to mining fossil fuels or minerals from land and the deep sea. Unsustainable extraction occurs in many forms, for example, clear-cutting forests; overfishing oceans, rivers, and lakes; and over-drafting groundwater from aquifers. Unsustainable extraction in whatever form is attended by greed, lawlessness, treatment of the earth and its marvelously varied inhabitants as an externality, and disregard for present and future generations.

In Butte, unsustainable extraction created the mammoth open pit known as the Berkeley Pit, a mile wide, mile-and-a-half long, and third of a mile deep abyss where thousands of snow geese have perished when landing on its toxic lake. It is a hellish legacy of the Anaconda copper mine. Ed Dobb tells the story in his article, *Pennies from Hell*.

That toxic abyss also symbolizes the deep hole that we and the fellow inhabitants of our planet will all be in if we don't act now, with the crucial help of the arts. Instead of going down the abyss, the arts can help us step away from the edge and begin moving in a different direction.

In her book, *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, And Art in the Changing West*, Lucy Lippard, author, curator, and confirmed project participant, writes that "Of course art cannot change the world alone, but it is a worthy ally to those challenging power with unconventional solutions." In their article, *Arts, Sciences and Climate Change: Practices and Politics at the Threshold*, scholars Jennifer Gabrys and Kathryn Yusoff, write that "Between sciences and arts, there are correspondences and passages to be detected, which may even come about through a shared attention to issues and events—like the breaking up of the actual Northwest Passage. Previously impassable or difficult terrain opens up—not to reveal a space of simple agreement, but instead to suggest new spaces of exploration, imagination and concern. Climate



*Large Bisbee Spiral*, 2011, by Lawrence Gipe. Mixed media on canvas. 96" x 120"

change reveals such a passage, a space of environmental shifts and cultural complexity, of scientific study and political conflict."

Combining their talents, vision, and aesthetic and ethical senses, artists can imaginatively and resolutely explore new spaces and forge alliances when fitting and feasible with scientists, lawyers, and other individuals and organizations concerned about our planet. Together, they can cross "the line where the pressure of duty leaves off and the challenge of excellence begins," in the words of legal philosopher Lon Fuller.

Seven years ago, in *Note to the Next Generation*, I said, "Apocalyptic words were not effective to cause people preoccupied with various stresses to pay attention to climate change and may have even fostered alienation, denial, and hostility." Since then, despite advances on some fronts, for example, in California and with the Paris Agreement, there have been retrograde and hostile maneuvers on others, for example, the current administration's renewed emphasis on unsustainable extraction, attack on protection of endangered species, disregard of environmental laws, withdrawal of the U.S. from the Paris Agreement, rejection of science, denial of climate change, and appeal to base and negative emotions. There is plenty of cause to sound the alarm. We also need to find and use improved ways of communication that will move people to act positively.



*The Chasm of Bingham*, 2012, by Erika Osborne. Oil on Linen 48" x 90".

The Extraction Art project holds the promise of fostering breakthrough changes in public opinion and public policy, including wider recognition of an enforceable human right to a healthful environment. It is a singular component of a multi-pronged strategy of action that involves various disciplines. It augments significantly the historic and current contributions of the arts to the environment and to meeting the challenges of climate change.

### **WHY ARE THE ARTS SO DESPERATELY NEEDED?**

Professional disciplines such as science, engineering, law, economics, public policy, and journalism are necessary but not sufficient to counter unsustainable extraction, environmental injustice, greed, and ignorance. They are not adequate alone to overcome the harm caused by “merchants of doubt,” “truth decay,” and insidious advertising. “The failure of widely accessible, compelling science to quiet persistent cultural controversy over the basic facts of climate change is the most spectacular science communication

failure of our day,” as Dan Kahan, founder of the Yale Cultural Cognition Project, has critically observed.

Science and the arts are closely related and can inspire each other. Both disciplines require creativity, imagination, perseverance, and passion. Leonardo da Vinci was an artist and inventor. John James Audubon was a naturalist and artist. Samuel F. B. Morse was an inventor and painter. Alan Bean was an astronaut and painter. Hedy Lamarr was an actress and inventor. Alexander Fleming’s artistic eye and painting of bacteria, along with serendipity and genius, helped him discover penicillin, benefit humanity, and earn the Nobel Prize. George Seurat’s paintings were influenced by the science of color. David Hockney’s views of art history are influenced by physics. Santiago Ramón y Cajal, a Nobel Prize winner and the reputed “father of modern neuroscience,” also produced more than twenty-nine hundred drawings that reveal the nervous system, many of which are reproduced in the recent book, *The Beautiful Brain*.

Evolving neuroscience is revealing the power of art to induce changes in human behavior, facilitate discovery, and inspire invention. Stories and other forms of art have the power to inspire empathy, motivate action, and release the brain's oxytocin (OXY), a neuropeptide that stimulates emotions and may induce altruism. One recent experiment concludes that "a more accurate understanding of altruism and its underlying regulatory mechanisms, including OXY" . . . may "motivate more individuals and groups to sacrifice money for ecological sustainability, which may help improve climate change prevention and the preservation of biodiversity." Perhaps altruism and a consequent sense of fairness and justice for our environment may also foster a sense of fairness and justice for each other.

While recognizing the positive potential of emotions and the arts and the insights of neuroscience, we must also recognize their negative potential for manipulation and misuse such as the propaganda reflected in Nazi, Soviet, and Maoist posters, films, and music. This danger is even more ominous in the digital age than it was in the "Age of Mechanical Reproduction" when Walter Benjamin warned that "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" and Clement Greenberg wrote that although it was "too difficult to inject effective propaganda into" avant-garde art and literature, "kitsch is more pliable to this end" and "keeps a dictator in closer contact with the 'soul' of the people."

Communicating science through art is essential. Reason and meaning on the one hand and emotion and feeling on the other are mutually reinforcing as well as occasionally in tension. The arts help link experience and emotion. As Elaine Scarry has written about beauty and justice and their mutual relationship with symmetry, "matters that are with difficulty kept legible in one sphere can be assisted by their counterpart in the other." Confronting climate change without engaging both sides of our brains is like confronting a bully with one hand tied behind one's back.

It took me some time to appreciate the crucial and important role the arts have played and must play. After writing about climate change and scientific uncertainty and participating in workshops with scientists, journalists, and lawyers, I realized that science and reason, although critical, are not getting through to enough people. This preview of the *Extraction Art* project's forthcoming glorious ruckus is written with the intention of sharing with those friends, colleagues, and potential supporters who might not already have considered it, my appreciation for the vital voices of artists.

## HOW CAN ARTISTS HELP?

Artists such as painters, musicians, dancers, poets, storytellers, dramatists and theater artists, photographers, filmmakers, fine-art printers, and cartoonists—who must also have environmental authenticity and credibility—are needed to bring their talents, creativity, spirit, and emotional sensibilities to the challenge of protecting and reclaiming our environment. They bring issues into the realm of emotions, affecting people on a sensory, spiritual, and visceral level in a way that scientific reports, statistics, graphs, and reason do not. They engage us. As artist and philosopher Enrique Martinez Celaya says, "Since it exists only as an experience, art is brought forth not only by the artist but also by its observer."

Artists remind us of our humanity and renew our determination to care for our earth and our descendants. They evoke the environmental intimacy reflected in cave paintings by ancient humans and Neanderthals and in contemporary artworks such as *Storm King Wavefield* by Maya Lin and *Storm King Wall* by Andy Goldsworthy. They help us restore lost intimacy and renew our reverence for nature, as Henry David Thoreau did in 1854 with *Walden* and as my friend and Earthjustice colleague, Edwin Matthews, does today in *Litchfield Country Journal: Notes on Wildness Around Us*. They move us from despair about a *Silent Spring* to the hopefulness of the hymn, *How Can I Keep from Singing*. Like the *Lorax*, they speak for the trees who have no tongues, and, like the fox who spoke to the *Little Prince*, they remind us that "You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed." Poet John Daniel, in *Descendants of the Nuclear Age*, reinforces our sense of responsibility to unborn descendants and fellow creatures who lack human voice and power: "only in us can they speak at all, they speak if we speak for them." Artists spark a child's sense of wonder, simplicity, and good-heartedness and rekindle those spirits in adults. They inspire action while rejuvenating our inner wilderness.

Artists of all ilk restate our deepest and evolving values in a language accessible to the times (whether fine arts, music, or literature). They reinforce the compassion that must attend the law and guide science, which without values and compassion are capable of monstrous undertakings. Their function, as Kenneth Rexroth said, "is the revelation of reality in process, permanence in change, the place of value in a world of facts." They act as our conscience, as Picasso's *Guernica* demonstrates so vividly. They help us cope with and sometimes even survive the direst conditions as they did for some prisoners in Nazi concentration camps and, under harsh but less



*Mad Mother*, 2016, by Timothy McDowell. Oil and Wax on linen.

dire conditions, for some Japanese Americans segregated and incarcerated in U.S. camps and centers during World War II. “Art is here to prove, and to help one bear, the fact that all safety is an illusion,” said James Baldwin in his talk, *The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity*.

Artists have lasting influence. They address the widespread hunger for community, spirituality, and fairness that Pope Francis, for example, in his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, and other leaders are addressing. They evoke our ability to empathize with victims of environmental injustice, cope with uncertainty, appreciate new frames of reference, identify with others, celebrate the natural world, surmount melancholy and apathy, and build morale such

as the song, *We Shall Overcome*, does in the ongoing struggle for civil rights. They transcend language barriers as well as national, political, and cultural boundaries. They dramatize earth wounds such as acid mine drainage (AMD) as well as reclamation. T. Allan Comp, a former historian for the National Park Service and a historic preservationist, has spurred community effort in Appalachia through his AMD&Art project to reclaim toxic former coal mines using design, sculpture, and history as well as science.

Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* combined science and imagery to help ignite the environmental movement. She also said, “I believe quite sincerely that in these difficult times, we need more than ever to keep alive those arts from which [we] derive inspiration and courage and consolation—in a word, strength of spirit.” Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* exposed the meatpacking industry and led to the Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906; Sinclair famously said “I aimed at the public’s heart and by accident I hit it in the stomach.” Likewise, the Abu Ghraib photographs and Fernando Botero’s paintings bring home the evils of torture and lawlessness, and Sebastião Salgado’s photographs illustrate the bravery and beauty of workers while their toil is being extracted under often grim conditions.

## ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONTRIBUTIONS BY ARTISTS

### POEMS

Poems such as *On the Fifth Day* by Jane Hirshfield, *Erosion* by Terry Tempest Williams, *Extinction* by Elizabeth Herron, *Poem of the One World* by Mary Oliver, *The Problem of Describing Trees* by Robert Hass, *Watershed* by Tracy K. Smith, *For the Children* by Gary Snyder, and *The Peace of Wild Things*, by Wendell Berry help us imagine a better world, comprehend the despoliation we have caused, listen to new voices such as “the cellists” in Jane Hirshfield’s poem, and enchant as well as sometimes disenchant us. “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley.

### SONGS

Songs such as *This Land is Your Land* by Woody Guthrie, *Big Yellow Taxi* by Joni Mitchell (“they paved paradise and put up a parking lot”), *What Have They Done to the Rain* by Malvina Reynolds, *Rejoice in the Sun* by Joan Baez, *Don’t Go Near the Water* by Johnny Cash, *Save Our Planet Earth* by Jimmy Cliff, and *Sailing*

*Up My Dirty Stream* by Pete Seeger, which contributed to the enactment of the Clean Water Act of 1972, are just a few among many examples of the intersection between music and the environment. The Climate Music Project makes climate change personal through music. We can strive to make it possible to sing *America the Beautiful* with conviction that the title is still true.

## DANCES

Environmental dance is evolving as a way of expressing our connection to the earth. Dancing on the banks of the Cannonball River in North Dakota, the Standing Rock Sioux, joined by representatives of over 250 indigenous tribes from around the world, sought to save the sacred earth and stop the Dakota Access Pipeline. As Barbara Ehrenreich writes in *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, “festivity generates inclusiveness.”

## PHOTOGRAPHS AND PAINTINGS

Photographs such as those by David Maisel, Robert Glenn Ketchum, Michael Light, Garth Lenz, and Mandy Barker depict the beauty of the earth as well as the despoliation that humans have caused by extraction. Christmas Eve 2018 will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Earthrise*, Apollo 8 Astronaut Bill Anders’ photograph that depicted the beauty and fragility of Earth and that the late Galen Rowell described as “The most influential environmental photograph ever taken.” Photographs are sometimes shocking, but can be deployed with intelligence and sensitivity to help prevent or mitigate shock as well as image fatigue, wariness of photo-shopping, and seduction by the beauty of a photograph despite the horror or cruelty it reveals.

Photographs and paintings contribute to legislation and public policy. William Henry Jackson’s photographs and Thomas Moran’s paintings led to the creation of Yellowstone National Park. The photograph of President Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir on Overhanging Rock at the top of Glacier Point, Yosemite, contributed to the joining of state grant lands and national park lands. Ansel Adams’ book, *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail*, led to the establishment of Kings Canyon National Park. Robert Glenn Ketchum’s book, *The Tongass: Alaska’s Vanishing Rain Forest* led to the Tongass Timber Reform Act of 1990. Believing in environmental action, Adams and Ketchum also lobbied diligently and successfully for their proposals.



*American Mine* (Carlin, Nevada 2, 2007), by David Maisel.

## LOOKING AHEAD WITH THE EXTRACTION ART PROJECT

The Extraction Art project has a big vision and a simple message: It is concentrating on the arts and the environment. It hopes to educate, provoke, inspire, and reinforce others—educators, activists, academics, journalists, scientists, policy and opinion makers, and concerned individuals while maintaining its independence as an art project. It expects by this approach to enlist topnotch artists and art venues while respecting their boundaries and helping non-artist groups and individuals call attention to the social and environmental consequences of industrialized natural resource extraction.

Peter, Edwin, and their allies are seeking additional fruitful liaisons and funding. They are especially interested in building publishing and

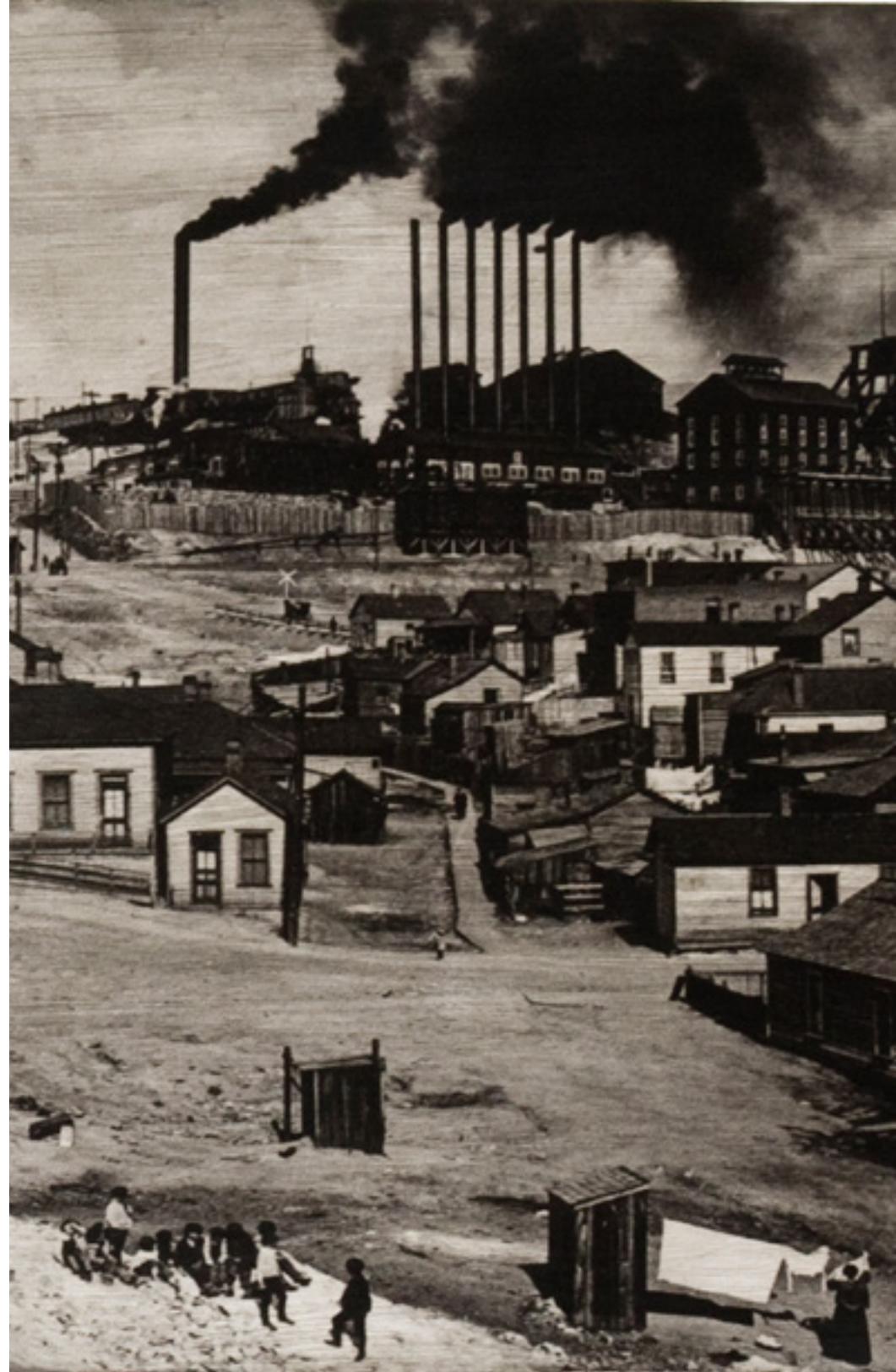
advertising media opportunities and sponsorship for exhibitions, especially in regrettably underfunded small art museums and non-profit galleries around the West and in potential musical venues. They aim to counter the nefarious forces that have targeted federal and state legislative and regulatory programs and begun a propaganda blitz promoting their anti-environmental policies. Now is an ideal time for philanthropists to support excellent projects to communicate science through art and reach people on an emotional level. “Climate philanthropy has failed” and needs to help environmentalists “learn how to speak from the heart as well as the head,” as Mark Gunther reports in the Chronicle of Philanthropy.

The project estimates that it will need \$250,000-400,000 to cover the costs over three years of publications, editing, marketing, administration, website creation, communications, and other requirements. It will seek funds from individual contributors, foundations, kick-starting and crowd-funding, event sponsorships and tickets, and, possibly, sales of items donated by artistic supporters. It will also seek non-monetary contributions such as paintings, poems, musical compositions, broadsides, photographs, printings, gallery space, and the help of volunteers.

After launching the fundraising campaign, the project will reach out to various environmental, tribal, and pertinent nonprofit organizations that are addressing the challenges of unsustainable extraction and climate change. The CODEX Foundation, a nonprofit tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization that Peter founded, will receive and administer charitable donations and project funds through a separate designated account (2203 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Berkeley, CA 94710-2214; tax id. no. 11-3763607).

The Extraction Art project affords an opportunity to build a movement that will help our planet, the innumerable varieties of life it sustains, our families, children and grandchildren, and untold generations to come if we act for them now. Come join the glorious ruckus.

Detail from *Liber Ignis*, 2015, by Peter Rutledge Koch





Event Horizon, 2017, by Christopher Volpe. Oil and tar on canvas, 48" x 48".

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#### PHOTOGRAPHS, PAINTINGS, FILM, LEGISLATION AND PUBLIC POLICY

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- *See also* the list of funders of the Nevada Center for Art + Environment, <http://www.nevadaart.org/ae/>

#### CODEX FOUNDATION

- <http://www.codexfoundation.org>
- Tax id. no.: 11-3763607; 2203 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Berkeley, CA 94710-2214

#### ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (PARTIAL LIST)

- Earthjustice, <https://earthjustice.org/>, will celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2021. For a synopsis of the work done by Earthjustice in its Northern Rockies Office, which includes important and effective litigation involving mines and lawless extraction, *see* <https://earthjustice.org/about/offices/northern-rockies> Tim Preso, a brilliant lawyer and former reporter, is the managing attorney for that office. *See* <https://earthjustice.org/about/staff/timothy-pres0> The Earthjustice Council, chaired by Cynthia Wayburn and Eric Kuhn, is an advisory group separate from the Board, *see* <https://earthjustice.org/about/earthjustice-council>. Tom Turner tells the story of the vital work and history of Earthjustice and its predecessor, The Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, in *WILD BY LAW: THE SIERRA CLUB LEGAL DEFENSE FUND AND The Places It Has Saved* (1990); *Justice On Earth: Earthjustice And The People It Has Served* (2002); *And Roadless Rules; The Struggle For The Last Wild Forests* (2009).
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- The Trust for Public Land, <https://www.tpl.org/>

AMERICAN TRIBES: “CONVERSATIONS WITH THE EARTH: INDIGENOUS VOICES ON CLIMATE CHANGE”

- <https://www.si.edu/Exhibitions/Conversations-with-the-Earth-Indegenous-Voices-on-Climate-Change-4647>



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