Ohio Community Rights Conference:
Growing Roots and Rights for Just Communities

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Columbus, Ohio

Nature:
Invisible Under the Law

Keynote Address by Mari Margil

Learn more at celdf.org.
Thank you. It’s an honor to be with all of you here today.

I would like to thank all of the staff and volunteers with the Ohio Community Rights Network and the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund who worked to bring this conference together.

I was invited to speak with you today about the growing movement for Community Rights and the Rights of Nature.

I understand that we’re all here because we care about a wide range of issues.

Some of us care strongly about the environment or public health, and perhaps are seeing toxic frack waste being dumped in their community, frack wells being drilled through aquifers, or Lake Erie being choked by algae and pollution, threatening their drinking water.

Others I know are here because they are passionate about social justice issues, about achieving a living wage and rights of workers; wanting to end the corporatization of prisons for profit.

And still others I know are here because they are tired of their communities being treated as “sacrifice zones” for Big Ag, Big Oil, and other industries who will do most anything to prevent “we the people” from being able to actually decide what happens in their own communities. They’re seeing their democratic rights trampled by not only corporations, but the very elected officials who are supposed to represent them and their communities.

Rather than thinking about these seemingly different issues – from the environment and public health, to social justice, worker justice, democracy, and others – rather than thinking of them as different, I am here because I want to talk about how they are much the same.

For so long our seemingly different concerns have split us into different voter categories, different organizations, different constituencies.

We do our activism and organizing targeting different people. And within our individual issue silos, we compete for members, for supporters, for foundation dollars.

Today I invite us to think about how these different issues aren’t so different at all. How they share common denominators which can unite us.

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To begin, let’s start with some facts.

Fact: Racism is intentional, and was created and legitimized by those who benefited from it. Who? White men who derived wealth and power and influence by persuading the people of the colonial powers that enslaved people were inferior.
They used fake science, as well as differences in culture, language, and skin color to “prove” this inferiority.

As historian Ibram X. Kendi explains, they successfully advanced the notion that Africans were *incapable* of governing themselves – that they were *better off* enslaved, rather than free.

Kendi writes about John Calhoun, who hailed from the first slave state to secede from the Union, South Carolina. Calhoun served as vice president and as a Senator during the early part of the 1800s.

He once declared, on the floor of the U.S. Senate, that slavery was a “positive good” – a positive good for society, and a positive good for subordinate Black people. He said slavery itself represented *racial progress*.

Fact: Racism is *intentional*, and was created and legitimized by those who benefited from it.

Fact: Gender discrimination is *intentional*, and was created and legitimized by those who benefited from it.

Who? Men, who derived wealth and power by persuading society that women were inferior, were weaker, and required men to govern them.

This resulted in women being denied the authority to own property, to have custody of their children, to keep the wages that they earned, and of course, to vote.

In making their case, opponents to women’s suffrage used arguments, such as those put forth by California State Senator J.B. Sanford. In 1911, Sanford wrote:

> “Woman is woman. She cannot unsex herself or change her sphere. Let her be content with her lot … Let the manly men, and the womanly women, defeat the suffrage amendment and keep woman where she belongs, in order that she may retain the respect of all mankind.”

Fact: Gender discrimination is *intentional*, and was created and legitimized by those who benefited from it.

Fact: Discrimination against nature is *intentional*, and was created and legitimized by those who benefited from it.

Who? Those who derived wealth and power through the widespread destruction of ecosystems and species. They persuaded people that nature was inferior, that animals were machines, that couldn’t feel emotion or pain. That nature needed people to govern it.

As writer Charles Glacken explains, the big thinkers on this subject, of the 19th Century and earlier, believed:
“Men must actively interfere with brute nature, in order to maintain civilization. Nature, untouched by man, is a lesser nature, and the economy of nature is best where man actively superintends it.”

Today, environmental laws focus on things like forest “management” and fisheries “management.” We still believe we must control nature, that it must be governed.

Fact: Discrimination against nature is intentional, and was created and legitimized by those who benefited from it.

Fact: Discrimination against democracy – that is, against “we the people” having true democratic authority – fact, discrimination against democracy is intentional, was created and legitimized by those who benefited from it.

At the CELDF, we teach weekend workshops called Democracy Schools. For those of you here who have attended them, you probably think they’d be better named, the I-thought-I-had-Democracy (but I don’t) Schools, because we look at how un-democratic our laws and governance actually are.

For example, we look at the debates of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, where the “founding fathers” – white men of wealth and property – were drafting a constitution that would be touted as creating the greatest democracy on earth.

In fact, convention delegates were having conversations that were anything but a celebration of democratic ideals.

This includes the so-called architect of the Constitution – James Madison – who said that the Constitution ought “to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority.”

And, Alexander Hamilton, of “Hamilton” fame, who spoke favorably of kings and monarchy, he argued of the need to protect against the “extremes of democracy.”

It is this thinking that shaped the Constitution, resulting in an inherently undemocratic framework – which denied the right to vote, as well as other legal rights, to the vast majority of the population it governed.

So, yes, Fact: Discrimination against democracy is intentional, and was created and legitimized by those who benefited from it.

This discrimination against people, against nature, against democracy, it’s all been intentional, to advance the wealth and power of the few over the many.

The Community Rights Movement is built upon this understanding about our system of law, and how it treats people, communities, and nature.
The CELDF, set up to help communities protect the local environment, immediately ran into this system. We found that no matter if a community was facing a factory farm, coal mining, or other threat, the law treated them the same way. Legalizing the activities and preventing communities from saying “no” to them.

We had to understand why, which gaining an understanding of how the structure of law preempted us from deciding what happens in our communities, how corporate rights are able to be wielded to override community decision making...

...how laws ostensibly enacted to protect the environment, were instead legalizing the very harms communities were trying to stop.

We learned that the law was developed intentionally to discriminate against democracy—in order to advance the interests of a few over the many, which required preventing us the people from interfering with those interests.

The scaffolding they created to hold up this system of law came in the form of legal doctrines—such as preemption—whereby higher levels of government are able override lower levels of government...

...and the doctrine of corporate rights - whereby corporations are able to interfere in our elections, our lawmaking, and our communities.

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The Community Rights Movement began as communities – facing a wide range of environmental and public health threats – came to understand how this system of law works.

Beginning with communities in rural Pennsylvania who began to refuse to accept the idea that they couldn’t decide what happened in their communities.

They began to refuse to accept that they couldn’t say “no” to activities that bring known harms – to the environment, kids, and families.

Beginning nearly two decades ago, first in Pennsylvania, and then into New England, into the Rockies, the Pacific Northwest, and even here in Ohio – this rebellion has grown, as more and more communities began to reject a system of law which does not recognize our authority to decide what happens in our hometowns.

Today, more than 200 communities across the country have enacted Community Rights laws.
These laws establish certain rights, including rights to clean air and water, to a healthy environment - and the right to be free from activities that would violate those rights such as factory farming and fracking.

They establish the right to local, community self-governance – which means more than just being able to say “no” to threats...

…but also, importantly, the authority to say “yes” – yes to sustainable energy, yes to sustainable agriculture, yes to establishing the sustainable, just communities that we need and want.

To do this, these communities have had to look at the fundamental building blocks of our governing structures – those laws and legal doctrines which were intentionally created to subordinate people, workers, communities, and nature.

So they’ve taken on preemption by higher levels of government, they’ve taken on corporate rights and powers, they’ve taken on laws which regulate the use and exploitation of people and nature.

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Here in Ohio, this began in 2012, when the first communities in the state – Yellow Springs and Broadview Heights – mobilized and organized to adopt Community Rights laws – which assert rights to clean air and water, and their right to local self-governance. Shale gas drilling and fracking were banned in these local laws as violations of community rights.

In 2013, Oberlin residents adopted a similar initiative by 70% of the vote, followed by the city of Athens in 2014.

Today, communities and counties across Ohio are engaged in Community Rights campaigns to protect themselves and local ecosystems from fracking, pipelines, and other threats.

This includes places like Youngstown, Toledo, and Columbus, in Portage County, Meigs County, and Williams County.

And as more communities have come together, five years ago they joined together to launch the Ohio Community Rights Network – who are hosting us today.

As Ohio communities and counties are supporting one another in their organizing, they are now advancing change to the state level. They are collecting signatures on two statewide initiatives that would amend the Ohio Constitution:

The first, the Community Rights Initiative, would establish the right of local, community self-government, and authorize people and their communities to expand environmental and
other rights and protections at the local level – above those set at the state level – and take
on those legal doctrines which deny us democratic rights.

The second statewide initiative – the Initiative and Referendum Amendment – would, for the
first time, extend the right of direct democracy, via the citizen initiative, to all the people of
Ohio.

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As the Community Rights Movement grows in Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Oregon,
and other states – it has given birth to a new area of law.

We talked earlier about discrimination against race, discrimination against gender,
discrimination against democracy, and discrimination against nature.

As the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund has worked with hundreds of
communities across the U.S. to ban threats to the environment – and advance community
rights, the local laws – what we call Community Bills of Rights – began to evolve.

Beginning in 2006, we began to work with the first communities in the U.S. – the very first
places in the world – to advance legal rights of nature.

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More than a century ago, John Muir, the American naturalist, wrote that we must respect “the
rights of all the rest of creation.”

More recently, in a speech before the United Nations, Pope Francis, in the face of climate
change and other threats, called for a new era of environmental protection - stating that, “A
true ‘right of the environment’ does exist…”

To advance a new era in protection of the environment, means we must first understand how
things are working today.

Much like we needed to gain an understanding of how the system of law discriminates
against democracy, we needed to understand how it discriminates against nature.

We looked at the major environmental laws in the United States - including the Clean Air Act
and the Clean Water Act – which were passed over forty years ago – these laws are now
mirrored in countries around the world.

What we’ve learned is that rather than protecting the rights of the environment, these laws
instead regulate its use.

Thus, rather than protect against fracking, our environmental laws legalize fracking. Rather
than protect against mining, environmental laws legalize mining.
Rather than protect against water privatization, pesticides, pipelines, and so on, environmental laws legalize those practices.

Under this legal framework, the planet is suffering.

Today we are living at a time of unprecedented species loss, ecosystem collapse, and, of course, climate change.

With species, today we are experiencing what many are calling the earth’s sixth great extinction, this time due to human activity. Species extinction is accelerating between 1,000 times and 10,000 times faster than natural background rates.

Meanwhile, coral reefs around the globe are bleaching and dying, with recent news of die-off across hundreds of kilometers of the Great Barrier Reef. This comes as studies show that coral reefs provide habitat for upwards of 9 million species.

Oceans today are heating up and acidifying due to global warming, putting marine ecosystems, including coral reefs, and species at grave risk.

And with the climate, we now know that temperatures are rising far faster than even the most optimistic scientific models predicted.

2015, 2016, and 2017 were the hottest years on human record.

But, this isn’t news. What is new are the growing numbers of people, communities, grassroots groups, and even governments that are recognizing and acting on this knowledge – understanding that we can-not protect the environment under existing, conventional environmental laws.

Today it’s clear that we must make a fundamental shift in humankind’s relationship with the natural world. Because our laws today, which discriminate against nature, are tearing holes in the very fabric of life.

To do this means changing not only how we think about our place as part of nature, but changing our basic structures of laws which govern our behavior toward nature.

In our view, this means we must provide the highest legal protection, on not only the human right to a healthy environment, but the rights of the environment itself.

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This represents a dramatic transformation in how the law treats nature today

Today environmental laws are premised on the legal doctrine that treats nature as property or an item of commerce.
In the United States, our major environmental laws were passed by the U.S. Congress under the authority of the Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution – the Commerce Clause, is the same authority under which Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act, as well as the major civil rights laws of the 1960s, treating workers and people as part of commerce.

And in the case of environmental laws, this meant treating species, waterways, and other ecosystems as commerce.

Environmental laws – both in the United States and around the world - regulate how we use that “property” or commerce – that is, they legalize the use or exploitation of nature.

Under this construct, nature is considered to be without legal rights – that is, it is considered “right-less” under the law. And thus, nature is effectively invisible in the law, and is not “seen” or recognized by the courts. Much like women, slaves, and others have been invisible before the law.

Recognizing legal rights of nature means transforming nature from being considered property to being rights-bearing.

Indigenous peoples, slaves, women – all have been considered right-less under the law – and thus unable to defend their own basic rights to exist and well-being.

So today do legal systems treat nature.

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As you may have experienced in your own advocacy – we can spend years trying to fight a permit for a new pipeline, or a new frack well – only to see permits for those projects ultimately issued by government to corporations.

In our organizing, we find that environmental laws, and environmental agencies, are focused on expanding fossil fuel extraction and other unsustainable industries, rather than protecting us against such practices.

Through our work at the Legal Defense Fund and with our partner Community Rights Networks, we examine how, and more importantly why, systems of law work this way.

Why inherently unsustainable practices are not only legal, but championed by government on behalf of industry – and further, why corporations have a right to frack and a right to mine, but nature doesn’t have the right to not be fracked, or the right to not be mined.

Through our organizing and trainings – including our Democracy Schools and the Ohio Community Rights Workshop – we examine this structure of law and governance.
We look at the long history of the colonization of people and nature, and the movements which have confronted the systems of laws which legitimized and supported it.

And, we look at how today’s legal system – aimed at endless, constant extraction and production – rather than being broken, is in fact working exactly as intended.

Understanding this, in our organizing, we are no longer trying to better regulate inherently unsustainable practices such as fossil fuel extraction.

We know that even if we “better regulate” these practices, the earth is still being drilled, mined, fracked, and poisoned - fossil fuels are still being extracted, transported, and burned.

To regulate something, means to allow it to happen. The people, communities, groups, tribal nations, and governments that we work with, don’t want these things to happen at all.

They recognize that these activities are fundamentally incompatible with environmental protection. And they understand that today we are not coming even close to living sustainably on the earth.

And so they find themselves in a position much like past movements.

Much like the Abolitionists who couldn’t protect the enslaved under a legal system which legalized their exploitation.

Much like the Suffragists who couldn’t protect women under a legal system which legalized their exploitation.

And much like today, communities can’t protect themselves under a legal system which legalizes their exploitation – forcing fracking, pipelines, and other harm into communities.

It took the building of broad-based people’s movements to end slavery, to recognize women’s rights, to change the system of law itself.

Today, we're also working to advance systemic change, by building a new people’s movement for Community Rights and the Rights of Nature.

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There’s a lot of talk about movements today.

In our trainings and workshops, we examine past movements to learn the key lessons about what made them successful. So I wanted to talk for a moment about them.

It takes movements of people to change the status quo, to recognize rights of those treated as right-less under the law. The Abolitionists, the Suffragists, and others have had to build movements to challenge the dominant structure - both the culture and legal frameworks – in order to change them.
These movements have had to show how existing structures of law were illegitimate and unjust, oppressive and destructive – and how they needed to change.

As we build a new people’s movement for communities and nature, we must also demonstrate how the status quo is inherently destructive.

Thus, how the existing system of environmental law that is based on treating nature as property, was never intended to protect nature… and further, how existing laws and legal doctrines – such as corporate rights and powers – are fundamentally incompatible with nature’s rights.

This history of people’s movements in countries around the world, show us that this kind of change – fundamental changes to our basic structures of law – builds upward from the grassroots, mobilizing a broad-base of people.

Further, past movements recognized that they were seeking, long-term, systemic change – thus, successful people’s movements in history built and mobilized over decades.

For instance, looking at the Suffragists, they built a movement that had to work for over 80 years to secure the right to vote for women.

The movement built upward from the grassroots. Locally, to the state level, and ultimately nationally to amend the U.S. Constitution. It took generations.

The Abolitionist movement similarly, took generations, building upward from the grassroots to drive fundamental changes in our constitutional framework.

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So today, how do we begin to build a movement for long-term, structural change? It begins first by acknowledging that what has come up until now hasn’t led to a sustainable relationship of humankind with nature.

Part of this is recognizing that while many nations have expanded their body of legal rights to include a human right to a healthy environment – the promise of that remains unfulfilled, as it’s become clear that fulfilling a human right to a healthy environment is dependent on the health of the environment itself.

Further, it means we need to move from an anthropocentric view of the world, to an eco-centric one – in both our cultures and our laws. To recognized ourselves as part of nature, rather than above nature.

And this means transforming how the law treats nature, by securing the highest protections for nature through the recognition of legal rights.

This includes rights to exist, thrive, regenerate, evolve, and be restored.
Over 10 years ago, the Legal Defense Fund began assisting the first communities in the United States to develop Rights of Nature laws – today, dozens of communities in ten states have enacted such laws.

The first was the small community of Tamaqua Borough in Pennsylvania, and today includes communities in New Hampshire, Ohio, New York, and other states.

This comes as part of the Community Rights laws that communities are advancing, securing legal rights of nature, and prohibiting certain practices – such as fracking - as a violation of community rights and the rights of nature.

Further, they directly confront the key legal barriers to protection of the environment and our communities – the doctrines which continue to discriminate against democracy and against nature.

This includes corporate “rights” – and thus the laws prohibit corporations, as well as higher levels of government, from overriding and preempting the rights of communities and nature.

And, critically, these laws empower nature, and the people within those communities, to defend and enforce their rights.

Further, taking key lessons from the Suffragist and other movements, communities that have enacted Community Rights and Rights of Nature laws are now reaching out to neighboring communities to help them learn about this and help them replicate this change.

And now, they are gathering together, within states, to drive change from the grassroots upward to the state level. As we’ve discussed the proposed state constitutional amendments moving forward here in Ohio, others are advancing in Oregon, New Hampshire, and other states.

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This change that began in a handful of rural, small communities in the United States, has brought us to work in other countries as well.

The Legal Defense Fund was invited to meet with the Constituent Assembly of Ecuador on Rights of Nature constitutional provisions.

In 2008, Ecuador became the first country in the world to recognize the Rights of Nature in its constitution. It was ten years ago this week that the people of Ecuador voted to ratify the constitution.

In the constitution, the Rights of Nature are recognized as fundamental rights. Article 71 of the Constitution reads that “Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has
the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes.”

Further, that “All persons, communities, peoples, and nations can call upon the public authorities to enforce the rights of nature.”

The first cases have now been tried in Ecuador, with courts ruling to uphold the fundamental, constitutional rights of nature, and the necessity of considering the rights of nature in decisions that impact the environment.

For example, the first case in 2011 – in which the rights of the Vilcabamba River were found to be violated by government road construction – the river was itself the entity bringing the case to defend and enforce its own rights.

Other cases in Ecuador have found that the rights of nature have been violated, and that actions must be taken to resolve those violations. Courts there have found that the rights of nature are “transversal,” affecting other rights in the Constitution.

Today, Bolivia has a Rights of Nature law in place. In 2010, Bolivia hosted the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth.

From there, the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth was issued – modeled on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it has now been presented to the United Nations General Assembly for consideration.

And there is growing interest in the Rights of Nature around the world.

We’ve been to Nepal, where we are working to build a coalition of environmentalists, indigenous peoples, trekkers, mountaineers, and others in support of a Rights of Nature amendment to the Nepal constitution to address climate change.

With our country partners, we have developed a “Right to Climate” framework – to establish the rights of the Himalayas to a healthy climate, and the rights of the climate itself to be healthy and free from human-caused global warming pollution.

This comes as studies find that the Himalayas – referred to as the earth’s third pole – today is the fastest warming mountain range on earth. Glaciers are melting, impacting people, water, species, and ecosystems.

As one Sherpa told me, “The mountains are turning black” – with the melting of ice and snow. Today, we are meeting with Members of Parliament as we build support for amending the constitution to recognize the Rights of Nature.
In India, we have been working for a number of years with environmental, public health, and faith groups on a national law to recognize rights of the Ganga River, and the people of India to a healthy river ecosystem.

The National Ganga River Rights Act was presented to Prime Minister Modi’s government, for its consideration.

This effort is being boosted by several decisions issued by the High Court of Uttarakhand, a state level court in northern India, which in 2017 ruled that the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers, as well as glaciers and other ecosystems within that state, possess certain rights.

The court determined this change in legal status was necessary to “protect and conserve” these critical ecosystems.

Today, half a billion people in India depend on the Ganges River, yet regulated under conventional environmental laws, it is an ecosystem in severe decline. As the court said, it’s very existence is in question.

Understanding the integral relationship of the people of India with the river, the campaign slogan is “Ganga’s Rights Are Our Rights.”

In Australia, in August, our partners launched a campaign to recognize rights of the Great Barrier Reef – as the reef suffers from warming ocean waters and pollution.

Together we developed model legislation to advance these rights at the grassroots, at the state level, and through a national constitutional amendment.

In Colombia, the Supreme Court issued a decision this year recognizing rights of the Colombian Amazon, which is being deforested, and where climate change impacts are growing.

This comes following a 2016 decision by Colombia's Constitutional Court – in which the Court ruled that the Atrato River possesses rights to “protection, conservation, maintenance, and restoration.”

Facing decades of mining which have severely impacted the river ecosystem and the indigenous peoples who live there, the court wrote:

“(P)olicies and legislation have emphasized access to economic use and exploitation to the detriment of the protection of the rights of the environment and of communities.”

Writing further, the Court said:

“(I)t is the human population that is dependent on the natural world - and not the opposite - and that they must assume the consequences of their actions and omissions with nature.
“It is a question of understanding this new sociopolitical reality with the aim of achieving a respectful transformation with the natural world and its environment, as has happened before with civil and political rights...

The Court added, “now is the time to begin taking the first steps to effectively protect the planet and its resources before it is too late…”

The Court ordered a number of steps to be taken, including establishing a joint guardianship for the Atrato River basin. The guardians are representatives from the national government and the indigenous people living in the basin.

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Many have said that the recognition of the Rights of Nature is in many ways a codification of indigenous values.

When we were working in Ecuador, indigenous delegates to the constitutional assembly, told us that enshrining the rights of nature in the constitution would strengthen their collective rights as indigenous peoples.

In 2015, we began working with members of the Ho-Chunk Nation – a tribal nation based in Wisconsin.

Earlier this month, the Ho-Chunk’s General Council voted – by over 85% - in support of a Rights of Nature amendment to their tribal constitution.

The amendment prohibits all fossil fuel extraction – as well as all genetically engineered organisms – as a violation of these rights.

The introduction to the Ho-Chunk amendment explains:

“The people of the Ho-Chunk Nation recognize that environmental laws which regulate the use and exploitation of nature are incapable of protecting Mother Earth. . . . in the tradition of our Nation’s relationship with Mother Earth, from which we came and upon which we depend, we recognize that to protect nature, we must secure the highest protections for her through the recognition of rights in the Nation’s highest law, our Constitution.”

Jon Greendeer, former president of the Ho-Chunk Nation, said to me, “The Rights of Nature is who we are, who we were, and who we will be.”

Steps by the tribal legislature and membership are now underway to finalize the amendment. If ratified, the Ho-Chunk will become the first tribal nation in the United States, to recognize the constitutional rights of nature within tribal law.
Closer to home, right here in Ohio, the people of Toledo are seeking to secure Rights of Lake Erie.

The Lake Erie Bill of Rights *would* have recognized the right of the lake to be healthy and free from pollution that today is destroying the ecosystem and depriving surrounding communities of safe water.

I say *would*, because last week the Ohio Supreme Court blocked the Lake Erie Bill of Rights from the November ballot. This is hardly the first time the court has blocked the people of Ohio from exercising their democratic rights. Discriminating against democracy.

But I will also say, we *will* one day recognize rights of the lake – because I expect Toledoans to continue to fight for these rights.

In fact, just in the last few days, Toledoans for Safe Water, who sponsored the initiative, filed a motion with the Ohio Supreme Court to reconsider its decision to kick the Lake Erie Bill of Rights off the ballot.

It is this kind of persistence, this unwillingness to accept things as they are, that is a hallmark of successful people’s movements.

And it comes with the understanding that fundamental change doesn’t just happen. We have to *force* it to happen.

But we cannot do it alone. The success of movements comes when we join together, understanding that our different fights aren’t so different after all.

In the 1800s, activists for women’s rights, and activists for abolition, understood that the legalization of slavery, the legalization of the subordination of women, stemmed from the same constitutional foundation – that they had common cause.

Many participated in both movements.

Today, as these commonalities that we share are better understood, the Community Rights Movements is beginning to expand beyond environmental issues, to engage communities focused on homelessness, worker protections, and other economic and social justice issues.

And so I invite you today, as we’re here together, to thing about commonalities, about how the system of law upholds a legal structure which protects discrimination against communities, against nature, and also against workers, against the poor, against people.

And so, in conclusion, after the break are the Community Conversations. These five breakout sessions include:

- Sustainable Communities, focusing on how we can, or more to the point, *can’t* protect the environment under existing state and federal legal structures.
- Healthy Communities, focused on public health and how we can or cannot make achievements in addressing addiction and other issues under existing legal structures.

- Fair Communities, will focus on worker and labor rights, and how we can or cannot protect workers under the law.

- Just Communities session will look at elections and money in politics, and how the law affects our democratic rights.

- Safe Communities session, looking at political accountability, racial profiling, and other ways people in communities are made unsafe under today’s laws and governing.

Five important sessions, and you are asked to choose one.

I invite you NOT to attend the one that you already know something about. The one that when you saw it on the agenda, instinct said “that's the one for me.”

Instead, for us to learn about how these seemingly different areas share much in common, I urge you to go to the session you know the least about.

This means getting out of our “comfort zones” – how about we get UNCOMFORTABLE together?

For that is the pathway forward to change.

Thank you.