

WE NEED YOUR IDEAS: A CALL FOR DIRECT ACTION IN THE CLIMATE MOVEMENT¹

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Dear Friends,

God, what a summer. Federal scientists have concluded that we've just come through the warmest six months, the warmest year, and the warmest decade in human history. Nineteen nations have set new all-time temperature records; the mercury in Pakistan reached 129 degrees, the hottest temperature ever seen in Asia. And there's nothing abstract about those numbers, not with Moscow choking on smoke from its epic heat wave and fires, not with Pakistan half washed away from its unprecedented flooding.

But that's just the half of it. It's also the summer when the U.S. Senate decided to keep intact its 20-year bipartisan record of doing nothing about global warming. Global warming is no act of God. We're up against the most profitable and powerful industries on earth: the companies racking up record profits from fossil fuels. And we're not going to beat them by asking nicely. We're going to have to build a movement, a movement much bigger than anything we've built before, a movement that can push back against the financial power of Big Oil and Big Coal. That movement is our only real hope, and we need your help to plot its future.

We've got some immediate and crucial priorities. For instance, groups around the world are joining together on 10/10/10 for a Global Work Party, demonstrating that we already know many of the solutions to the climate crisis. That will be a good day not just to put up solar panels, but also to shame our political leaders, to say to them, "We're getting to work. What about you?" Meanwhile, around the country, lawyers and community groups are doing yeoman's work fighting off new coal plants, activists are persuading banks to stop loaning to corporate villains, city councils are figuring out how to make their towns more efficient and resilient. This is the basic work of any movement, the foundation on which hope for long-term progress rests.

But necessary as such efforts are, they're not sufficient. We're making progress, but not as fast as the physical situation is deteriorating. Time is not on our side, so we've concluded that going forward **mass direct action must play a bigger role in this movement**, as it eventually did in the suffrage movement, the civil-rights movement, and the fight against corporate globalization. Even now, environmentalists in places like the coalfields of Appalachia have been putting these tactics to good use, albeit in small ways. (In the spring of 2009, our three groups worked with others to pull off a large-scale action outside the congressional power plant in D.C. that resulted in a promise that it would cease to burn coal.) History suggests, in other words, that one way to effectively communicate both to the general public and to our leaders the urgency of the crisis is to put our bodies on the line.

Nobody can predict which one event will trigger social change. Paul Revere was not the only rider to warn of the British advance, and many people refused to move to the back of the bus

¹ An open letter from the Rainforest Action Network, Greenpeace USA, and 350.org: What will it take to finally get serious about climate change? Published on September 14, 2010 by YES! Magazine

before Rosa Parks. But we do know two things. First, that we must act with unity, and second, many minds working together are likely to be smarter. So we're asking for your help. As you go about your other work on behalf of the planet and its diverse communities, **think about the possibilities for direct action, and write them down and send them to us.** Here are a few thoughts to guide you.

- Our actions must be infused with the spirit of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and other peaceful protesters before us. No violence, no property damage.
- We need large actions, with many members of the general public. Think hundreds and thousands. So don't concentrate on the kind of tactics that only a few hardy specialists can carry out; we're not going to have hundreds of people rappelling or scuba diving.
- We don't think for a minute that we can actually physically shut down the fossil-fuel economy for any meaningful period; it's too big. We need to aim for effective symbolic targets—say, dirty, old coal-fired power plants—and use them to make clear the need and opportunity to cut carbon fast.
- Our actions must be rooted in the communities where they are held and be organized hand in hand with local groups and activists.
- Our tactics need to engage onlookers, not alienate them. We have to have effective ways of keeping provocateurs and incendiaries at a distance, and attracting the kind of people who actually influence the rest of the public. Discipline will matter.
- We need to be transparent and open in our planning, not reliant on secrecy. We'll need to do our work certain that law enforcement is looking over our shoulders; our method can't be surprise.
- Beauty counts. We're fighting for the beauty in the world that's being stolen by our adversaries, and at the same time we're aiming for hearts and minds.
- We don't have unlimited resources. The cost and complexity of these kinds of actions can mount quickly. As with all things environmental, frugality and simplicity are virtues.

Note that though all of our groups have international operations, we're only thinking about America right now. That's for three reasons. One, in some parts of the world activists have already done great work that can teach us a lot. Two, America really has to show some leadership, since we're historically the biggest cause of climate change. And three, though we Americans face real and sobering risks when we engage in direct action, people doing the same things in many other nations can be locked up for decades or worse; in those places, other tactics will have to suffice.

Note too that though this letter comes from just three environmental groups, we want this fight open to everyone. We'll happily work with any organization that shares our goals and tactics as plans go forward; in fact, we think that breaking down boundaries between groups is key to any chance at success. We'll do our best to reach out, but please make sure you let us know you want to be involved.

We've set up a special email address for ideas: climate.ideas@gmail.com By late autumn, we hope we'll have been able to mine those ideas and start coming up with coherent plans for actions starting next spring.

We know this strategy won't appeal to all of you. That's fine; there are a thousand other useful ways to help, and we don't want to distract anyone from other work they're doing. But if you have ideas, send them in. It's clear to us that this is going to be a battle for the long haul, and

we're going to need to be creative and committed. Thanks much for being a big part of it.