

# Talking with Frances Beinecke

***Frances Beinecke, NRDC's longtime executive director, will become NRDC's next president when John Adams steps down in January.***

**Q: When did you begin working at NRDC?**

A: I first came to NRDC in 1973 as an intern while I was a student at the Yale School of Forestry. I worked on forestry issues in New York's Catskills. And here we are 32 years later and again fighting to protect the Catskills. After I finished at Yale, I came back to NRDC and helped start the coastal protection project. We worked to block proposed oil and gas leasing off the mid-Atlantic states. That proposal was part of industry's answer to the energy crisis of the 1970s. And again, here we are in 2005 with a Senate energy bill that promotes offshore oil and gas drilling. It just shows you that unless we can permanently protect these places, the threats are never resolved.

**Q: Where did your environmental concern come from?**

A: As a kid I went to Wyoming a number of times. We camped at White Grass Ranch at the base of the Tetons. It was a fantastic experience of wide-open and wild places. They were magical landscapes, and they left a lasting impression on me. Later, in college, I discovered the Adirondack Forest Preserve. I couldn't get over the fact that there was this vast wilderness so close to New York City, just a few hours from 20 million people. I was inspired by the vigilance of the local people and legislators who had protected the park. In college I knew I was interested in the public interest and social causes but I didn't have a career path mapped out. Then Earth Day came along. The environmental movement felt like a very positive direction to go in. Coming to NRDC when I did was very good fortune because I was just at the beginning of my career and NRDC was very young and the movement was young. We all grew up together.

**Q: Mardy Murie was an early mentor of yours. Tell us about her.**

A: She was on the board of The Wilderness Society, which I was invited to join in the late 1970s. Mardy was inspirational, the most passionate advocate for wilderness you could ever meet. She grew up in Alaska, and she was the first woman graduate of the University of Alaska. Right after she was married, she and her husband Olaus, a wildlife biologist, went up into the Arctic by dog sled. She was a leading voice for protection of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in the 1970s. She understood the importance of wilderness to lift the spirit and provide solace. There was also Celia Hunter, who chaired that same Wilderness Society board. Celia was a pilot in World War II, and she ran Camp Denali next to Mt. McKinley in Alaska. She and Mardy were a great pair. Not only were they terrific advocates but they had tremendous experience in the field — experience that we can hardly imagine today. They had strength and determination and character. I learned a lot from them.

**Q: After ten years, you left NRDC in 1983. Why?**

A: I had my second and third child together — twins. So, three children under three years of age prompted me to take a break. Then John Adams asked me to come back in 1990 to help



reorganize NRDC's programs and develop the first strategic plan.

At that point, we were finally recognizing that NRDC was going to be around for awhile and that we had to think beyond survival to where we wanted to go long term.

**Q: One guiding principle you've fostered as executive director is the need for different programs to work together on issues. Why is that so important?**

A: Because of the scale of the environmental problems we're grappling with, you have to get people from different disciplines collaborating to have an impact. We've moved beyond the days when a court victory alone can actually win the fight. Today, litigation is one part of an integrated strategy that may also involve local media, online activism and consumer demand. For example, back in the 1980s NRDC's tag line was "The power of law, the power of science, the power of people." But we didn't have the people! Today, we have 1.2 million Members and online activists. Those forces make a big difference.

**Q: Give an example of how that kind of integrated strategy works?**

A: The Cumberland Plateau victory is the most recent example. First, we put the Cumberland on our list of BioGems and attracted a lot of public attention to the threat. Then we mobilized our Members and BioGems Defenders to pressure Bowater. Next, John Adams and our forestry team negotiated with the company to protect the forest. Meanwhile, our paper team is getting these companies to realize that recycling is a viable solution. We're also looking beyond logging practices to how to protect and manage these spectacular forests over the long term. So the approach goes much further than just fighting the immediate battle. It's the same down in Laguna San Ignacio, where we won a huge victory over Mitsubishi five years ago. We made a commitment then that we would stay for the long term. Today, we're helping carry out a conservation plan that could protect the whale nursery forever.

**Q: How has visiting NRDC's BioGems affected you?**

A: I think everybody is moved by marine mammals, but to go to Laguna San Ignacio and experience gray whales in a natural environment is life changing. Recently, I went to Yellowstone again. It's remarkable to think of people in the nineteenth century having the foresight to protect these wild places for future generations. It really makes you think about what our own responsibilities are.

**Q: And what are those responsibilities?**

A: We've spent 30 years focused on what is most obvious to us: cleaning up air and water, protecting the land. That's still important, but now we're looking at ocean environments, atmospheric

systems, the great northern forests. They're harder to get your arms around from personal experience, but I think that's the challenge for this generation, to work on the global picture. We've got to figure out other ways to provide for ourselves without destroying these life-support systems.

**Q: NRDC has spent a lot of time and resources since 2001 defending the environment against Bush Administration policies. How successful have we been?**

A: I think we've been very successful under the circumstances. To the extent we could succeed through litigation, we've done so — blocking administration rollbacks of clean air and clean water laws; stopping global deployment of the Navy's dangerous LFA sonar system; defending the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness and its wildlife against the proposed Rock Creek Mine; and many, many other courtroom victories. We've also done a good job defensively in Congress — getting some terrible provisions out of the pro-polluter energy bill; blocking the president's Clear Skies bill; preventing the Pentagon from getting exemptions from environmental laws. The area where we've had less success is where the president has administrative authority — like the roadless rule that protects wild national forests. All in all, we've done a pretty amazing job holding the line. I am very proud of what our staff has been able to accomplish. The problem is, holding the line doesn't solve long-term problems.

**Q: Can we play defense and tackle those long-term problems at the same time?**

A: We have to. Even as we protect existing laws from being weakened, there are many indicators out there that environmental quality is deteriorating — global warming, ocean degradation, more toxic chemicals in the environment, an increase in cancers. So we have to find ways to get back on the offensive. For decades we saw the federal level as the place to get new protections in place. Now that's almost impossible, so we're looking for opportunities at the city, state and international levels to advance smart policies that eventually will take hold at the federal level. For example, the California car bill that requires automakers to reduce tailpipe emissions of global-warming pollutants. And our international campaign, which targets the European Union and NATO, to protect whales by restricting the use of deadly military sonar in routine training. Success in these venues will build pressure on the U.S. government.

**Q: What role will our Members play in NRDC's future?**

A: Our Members have become so much more important to our work over 30 years. In the beginning, we were one of the few groups working on environmental issues. We were the experts and our proposals carried a lot of weight. Today there are a million experts, so smarts alone don't matter as much anymore. You can have the smartest solution in the world, but if that solution isn't embraced by a large group of people, it's just not going to be adopted. That's why our large Membership is so critical. Without it, we're just another expert with a point of view. But when you add 1.2 million Members and activists who share that view, who care about it, who genuinely think it's important for the environment, then we're going to advance that view much more quickly and have a good chance of prevailing.

**Q: Beyond our Members, the vast majority of Americans say they care about the environment but we're still on the defensive. Why?**

A: People want to protect the environment where they live. Most believe strongly they have a right to clean air and water, whether they consider themselves environmentalists or not. Then there are a big number of people who care passionately and who want to join us. But there are many others who don't necessarily want to be part of a movement. We need to find common ground with them so they can help advance our cause without having an NRDC or "environmentalist" tag on them.

**Q: What groups is NRDC reaching out to?**

A: Any group affected by environmental quality issues. We're working with the Hispanic community, which is a growing political voice in America. We need to work with ranchers, parents, seniors, immigrants. This spring we partnered up with a group of prominent conservatives in a campaign aimed at reducing our dangerous dependence on foreign oil. They're concerned with that dependence from a national security perspective. That matched up with our concern about reducing global-warming pollution and weaning America off oil. We don't agree on a lot of things but we agreed on this. We should do the same with religious organizations. People in the progressive community are reserved when it comes to talking about their religion. We need to break out of that reserve. I bet half our Members are affiliated with religious organizations. Many of those groups have already taken pro-environmental positions. We need to connect those dots and partner up.

**Q: Few national environmental groups are led by women. Are you a role model?**

A: I don't know if I'm a role model but I know people like to see women succeeding. When the announcement went out that I would be NRDC's next president, lots of women told me they were very excited about that. But to me, NRDC has always been a place where women had an important voice in the direction and leadership of the organization. That is one of John's great legacies — he encouraged everybody, and he went out of his way to be sure there were strong women at NRDC. Sixty percent of the staff are women, many of them in top management positions.

**Q: You have three children. Have they changed the way you see things environmentally?**

A: When you work day to day for the environment, you need to find ways to refresh yourself and remind yourself why it's important to do the work. One way is to go to a wild place and be restored by it. Another way is to see it through another person's eyes. Kids are very open in the way they see things. They are shocked by the bad things and excited by the good things. I remember one time I had my kids in the car and as I backed out of the driveway, I stopped to talk with my neighbor while my car was idling away. My daughter was in the fifth grade at the time, and she said, "Mom, how can you let the car idle and cause all that global warming?" She was right, of course. We all need those kinds of reminders.