CLIMATE TALK



**Environmental Patriotism**

Dylan Couch

Bayfield

Whenever I hear the word patriotism, several images or words spring to mind, including associations with war, the American flag, and nationalism. State leaders ignite patriotism in their citizens in order to mobilize them and gain loyalty on specific policies. And as a country roused by patriotism we have accomplished seemingly impossible feats over the course of American history, from gaining independence to landing on the moon. Using this same call to action, I argue that patriotism might be the lever this country needs to overcome issues posed by an increasingly threatened environment.

A 2018 report by the Pentagon concluded that climate change poses a severe risk to 1,700 military bases around the country, and according to the New York Times, in March 2018, the United Nations deemed climate change “the most systemic threat to humankind.” Patriotism, historically, helped our country against foreign threats by making citizens passionate to the cause. In these times, war is not the greatest danger to the integrity of our values and customs. Now, the same appeal to patriotism that stirred citizens to protect our homeland in war is needed in rallying the country to address the threat of climate change.

Merriam Webster dictionary defines patriotism as “love for or devotion to one’s country.” Based on this definition, then, those dedicated to protecting the wildlife, vegetation, landscapes and waters of this country are patriots in the sense they want the best for their physical country. The most cherished patriot of the 20th Century might be Smokey the Bear whose pro-environmental message on preventing wildfires became one of the most successful ad campaigns ever produced. Smokey’s success hinges on the understanding that the cultural world is inextricably linked to the physical. His message creates the belief that protecting the environment is a patriotic act, and as a paradigm, Smokey demonstrates the success of environmental patriotism in the public sphere.

Our elected leaders are the ones citizens stand behind, so those elected to govern who have beneficial stances on the climate are the ones best suited to lead this new patriotism. It is time that we, as a nation, stand and face this problem the same way we overcame daunting challenges in the past. Climate change poses possibly the greatest trial America has yet faced, and those who succeed in demanding the attention of the public to deal with it will be a special kind of people – environmental patriots.

*After receiving a B.A. from UW- Stevens Point where he studied English and Environmental Studies, Dylan moved to Bayfield with his partner, Lindsay, because of the captivating north woods landscape. He spends his time gardening on Madeline Island and at home, foraging, reading, and writing fiction with environmental themes*