

# Open letter to 1Sky from the grassroots

Grist.org 24 Oct 2010

[grist.org/article/2010-10-23-open-letter-to-1-sky-from-the-grassroots](http://grist.org/article/2010-10-23-open-letter-to-1-sky-from-the-grassroots)

*I was asked to post the letter below, written by grassroots organizations across the United States (Grassroots Global Justice, Movement Generation, Indigenous Environmental Network, Global Alliance for Incineration Alternatives — full list at the end). We are at a critical moment for reflection on movement strategy. Perspectives from the front-lines are illuminating. — Joshua Kahn Russell*

## To the board and staff of 1Sky,

We are grassroots and allied organizations representing racial justice, indigenous rights, economic justice, immigrant rights, youth organizing, and environmental justice communities actively engaged in climate justice organizing. Given the very necessary discussion spurred by [your recent public letter](#) (Aug. 8, 2010), we wanted to share with you some of the work we have been doing to protect people and planet, as well as our reflections on a forward-thinking movement strategy. Your honest reflections on the political moment in which we find ourselves, alongside the open invitation to join in this discussion, are heartening.

**Organizing a powerful climate justice movement:** Like you, we recognize climate disruption as a central issue of our time. With the right set of strategies and coordinated efforts, we can mobilize diverse communities to powerful action. Our organizing strategy for climate justice is to: 1) Organize in, network with, and support communities who have found their frontlines<sup>[1]</sup> of climate justice; 2) Organize with communities to identify *their* frontlines of climate justice, and 3) Coalesce these communities towards a [common agenda](#) that is manifested from locally defined strategies to state and national policy objectives through to international solidarity agreements.

## Community-led climate justice has been winning

In assessing the broader landscape of climate activism, it is critical to recognize that despite the failure of D.C. policy-led campaigns, there have also been significant successes on the part of grassroots climate justice campaigns across the U.S.

Frontline communities, using grassroots, network-based, and actions-led strategies around the country have had considerable success fighting climate-polluting industries in recent years, with far less resources than the large environmental groups in D.C. These initiatives have prevented a massive amount of new industrial carbon from coming on board — here are just a few examples:

**Stopping King Coal with community organizing:** The Navajo Nation, led by a *Dine'* (Navajo) and *Hopi grassroots youth movement*, forced the cancellation of a Life of Mine permit on Black Mesa, Ariz., for the world's largest coal company — Peabody Energy. Elsewhere in the U.S., community-based groups in Appalachia galvanized the youth climate movement in their campaigns to stop mountaintop removal coal mining, and similar groups in the Powder River Basin have united farmers and ranchers against the expansion of some of the world's largest coal deposits.

**Derailing the build-out of coal power:** Nearly two thirds of the 151 new coal power plant proposals from the Bush Energy Plan have been cancelled, abandoned, or stalled since 2007 — largely due to community-led opposition. A recent example of this success is *the grassroots campaign of Dine' grassroots* and local citizen groups in the Burnham area of eastern Navajo Nation, N.M. that have prevented the creation of the *Desert Rock* coal plant, which would have been the third such polluting monolith in this small, rural community. Community-based networks such as the Indigenous Environmental Network, the Energy Justice Network, and the Western Mining Action Network have played a major role in supporting these efforts to keep the world's most climate polluting industry at bay.

**Preventing the proliferation of incinerators:** In the last 12 years, no new waste incinerators (which are more carbon-intensive than coal and one of the leading sources of cancer-causing dioxins) have been built in the U.S., and hundreds of proposals have been defeated by community organizing. In 2009 alone, members of the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives *prevented dozens of municipal waste incinerators*, toxic waste incinerators, tire incinerators, and biomass incinerators from being built, and forced Massachusetts to adopt a moratorium on incineration.

**Defeating Big Oil in our own backyards:** A community-led coalition in Richmond, Calif., has *stopped the permitting of Chevron's refinery expansion* in local courts. This expansion of the largest oil refinery on the West Coast is part of a massive oil and gas sector expansion focused on importing heavy, high-carbon intensive crude oil from places like the Canada's tar sands. This victory demonstrates that with limited resources, community-led campaigns can prevail over multi-million dollar PR and lobby campaigns deployed by oil companies like Chevron, when these strategies are rooted in organizing resistance in our own backyards. Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands (REDOIL), an Alaska Native grassroots network, has been effective at ensuring the Native community-based voice is in the forefront of protecting the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. Together with allies, REDOIL has also *prevented Shell* from leasing the Alaska outer continental shelf for offshore oil exploration and drilling. Advancing recognition of culture, subsistence, and food sovereignty rights of Alaska Natives within a diverse and threatened aquatic ecosystem has been at the heart of their strategy.

**Stopping false solutions like mega hydro:** Indigenous communities along the Klamath River forced Pacificorp Power company to agree to “**Undam the Klamath**” by the year 2020, in order to restore the river’s natural ecosystems, salmon runs, and traditional land-use capacity. For decades, Indigenous communities have been calling out false solutions — pointing to the fact that energy technologies that compromise traditional land-use, public health, and local economies cannot be considered climate solutions.

**Building resilient communities through local action:** In communities all over the U.S., frontline communities are successfully winning campaigns linking climate justice to basic survival:

- In San Antonio, Texas, the Southwest Workers Union led the fight to divert \$20 billion from nuclear energy into renewable energy and energy efficiency. In addition, they launched a free weatherization program for low-income families and a community run organic farm.
- In Oakland, Calif., the **Oakland Climate Action Coalition** is leading the fight for an aggressive Climate Energy and Action Plan that both addresses climate disruption and local equity issues.

### **Lessons from the Beltway strategy**

Our analysis of mainstream climate advocacy’s failure to win in the federal arena echoes yours, but differs in key areas. We agree there was insufficient investment in movement building, and a “Beltway strategy” was prioritized without clarity on what the bottom lines were. “Anything is better than nothing,” will always lead to nothing, because it is a declaration of our intention to compromise. As a result, a decade of advocacy work, however well intentioned, migrated towards false solutions that hurt communities and compromised on key issues such as carbon markets and giveaways to polluters. These compromises sold out poor communities in exchange for weak targets and more smokestacks that actually prevent us from getting anywhere close to what the science — and common sense — tells us is required. We encapsulate the lessons learned as follows:

**Access was confused for influence:** We do not have influence in D.C., regardless of how much face-time we get with legislators, or their staffers. To start from a place of power, you must first figure out where you have power, and build from there. We have power in our communities where we have relationships and can hold politicians and corporations accountable. In D.C., corporate power rules because they can concentrate energy, resources, and relationships there — in ways we cannot. However, when confronting these same corporations *in our tribes, cities, and towns*, we reveal that they are not nimble or powerful enough to defeat our communities.

**Density was confused for depth; and mobilizing for organizing:** Since we are calling for a redoubling of grassroots organizing efforts, we should be clear what we mean. Grassroots organizing is the process by which people in

communities rally around a common cause, acting on their own behalf with allies and networks — often against powerful interests, often building new institutions needed to win a lasting change. The material conditions in communities have to change for the material conditions in D.C. to change. Anyone looking to support real and effective solutions would do well to look outside the Beltway.

**Targets were confused for solutions:** We will never win by centering our principal energy on CO2 targets alone. Real solutions must move past carbon targets, whether it is parts per million or percentages of emissions. Here is why: 1) Targets reinforce the “carbon fundamentalism” frame that hides the root causes of climate change. By not talking about root causes, we miss opportunities to connect climate disruption with failures of economic systems, resource wars, and forced migration, for example. Targets also serve to reduce discussion on climate to arenas where corporations have greater access. 2) How we get to the targets is more important than the targets. By staking our claim solely around a target, we leave the political space for false solutions wide open. From technology solutions such as “clean coal,” “safe nuclear,” and “renewable biomass” to market solutions such as offsets — these so-called solutions serve to line the pockets of those who got us into this mess in the first place, without dealing with the root cause. The targets we do articulate along with our solutions should be extremely aggressive and aligned with call from international social movements, such as those coming from the World Peoples’ Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth.

### **Flipping the script: leading with the grassroots**

Given the significant gains we have had with community-led strategies for climate justice, and the failure of resource-intensive, Beltway policy campaigns, we need to re-prioritize building power from the bottom up. The strategy we emphasize includes: 1) Investing in grassroots action at frontline struggles to win the victories that build our power, improve our communities and *stop the corporations causing climate disruption*; 2) Prioritizing local organizing to build the resilient communities, economic alternatives, and political infrastructure that we need to *weather the climate crisis*; and, 3) Supporting solidarity with grassroots movements around the world, to link our struggles, and to craft policies and structures we need internationally to support solutions determined locally.

### **International solidarity for a stronger movement — beyond Cancún**

As grassroots forces, we have been building with social movements from around the world. Our groups were well represented at the World Peoples’ Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Bolivia in April 2010. The Peoples’ Conference modeled what a more democratic, transparent policy-making process could look like and resulted in proposals that were formally submitted to the UNFCCC, Conference of Parties 16, in Cancun. These submissions are in the negotiating text, being championed by several southern nations.

The demands in these submissions are clear and strong – no offsets, no (carbon) markets, no commodification of our atmosphere or of life. While “offsets” are often cloaked as opportunities for “clean development,” this claim fails on two counts. First, offsets do not lead to clean development but to greater destruction, displacement, and disempowerment. Second, the very premise of offsets is that it is allowable to continue polluting in poor communities and communities of color in the U.S. to justify over-industrialization of communities and their resources elsewhere. As communities fighting climate pollution in our own backyards, we link our struggles with social movements worldwide to stand against offsets and other false solutions and to build real solutions based in our communities. We call on you to stand with us. If there is anything you can take away from this letter, we reiterate:

**The equation of power in our movement, just as in our country, must be inverted:** *The leadership is coming from the grassroots everyday.* We will win climate justice by supporting the hundreds of communities around the country who are targeting the climate polluters in their communities, whether that is an energy source, a toxic industry, a dirty port, a big box chain, a freeway, or a developer driving gentrification. Resources should be deployed to win those fights in those communities — for their own sake.

Grassroots organizing cools the planet.

In power,

Movement Generation: Justice and Ecology Project

Indigenous Environmental Network

Grassroots Global Justice Alliance

Southwest Workers Union

Southwest Organizing Project

Black Mesa Water Coalition

Resisting Environmental Destruction On Indigenous Lands

Communities for a Better Environment

Just Transition Alliance

Asian Pacific Environmental Network

Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives

Alaska Community Action on Toxics

Direct Action for Rights and Equality

Little Village Environmental Justice Organization

People Organized to Win Employment Rights

Youth For Justice Save Our Sacred Earth

Seventh Generation Fund for Indian Development  
Alternatives for Community and Environment  
Justice in Nigeria Now  
Ironbound Community Corporation  
Don't Waste Massachusetts Coalition  
Berthold Environmental Awareness Committee  
Grassroots International  
Global Justice Ecology Project  
smartMeme  
Ruckus Society  
Rising Tide North America  
Energy Justice Network  
Stand Up / Save Lives Campaign  
Earth Circle Conservation & Recycling  
Biofuelwatch  
Coal River Mountain Watch  
Rainforest Action Network  
Buckeye Forest Council  
Causa Justa::Just Cause (CJJC), Oakland and San Francisco, CA  
Asian/Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL)  
Oakland, CA  
Buckeye Forest Council, Columbus, OH  
Climate Ground Zero, Rock Creek, WV  
Mobilization for Climate Justice West, (MCJW) San Francisco Bay Area, CA  
Institute for Policy Studies  
Sustainable Energy and Economy Network (IPS SEEN)  
National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR)  
Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition  
(Partial List of Signatures)

You can sign onto this letter as an individual at [Change.org](https://www.change.org).

**Endnotes:**

[1] Frontline communities, in this context, are communities who see how they are directly impacted by the root causes of, impacts from and false solutions to the ecological crisis. These communities have connected their struggles against economic exploitation and environmental injustice, for example, to the climate crisis. As the case of Katrina and the Gulf Coast region amply illustrates, the communities already vulnerable to environmental racism are also those most susceptible to the climate crises. Those hit first and worst are most often the least responsible for the crisis yet are actively leading the fight against major climate polluters.