

2019 National Affairs & Legislation Conference - Washington, D.C.

February 25 – 28, 2019

Report by Susan Palatucci

I am so honored to have represented the Worcester Garden Club as a delegate at NAL this year. It was an eye-opening experience on how powerful the GCA has been in the foundation of environmental protection in America. I spent three days in a very exciting time to be in Washington DC.

The conference opened on Sunday with a session on advocacy training. Naomi Edelson, Senior Director of Wildlife Partnership at the [National Wildlife Federation](#) and Lesley Kane of the Outdoors America group both shared ideas about the best way to meet with our Senators, Congressmen and women and their staff.

Delegates were also told that the GCA is a 501c3 organization that does not advocate for candidates – they are non-partisan and issue based. They advocate for environmental positions and are supported by the ten GCA Position Papers ([see them here](#)), which are the foundation of the GCA legislative policy.

It was announced that there is a new GCA project, the Restoration Initiative, to provide funding for public landscape restoration and conservation projects in communities devastated by natural disaster. This past year, five grants totaling \$50,000 were awarded to five clubs. The application is only one page. Clubs are encouraged to apply. Also announced is there is new [Conservation Study Conference](#). Registration will open on April 22 for the conference which will be held in Louisville, KY on September 22-26, 2019.

The conference began on Monday by hearing [Dr. Katherine Hayhoe](#), who gave us a primer on Climate Change. Her talk, “Mitigate, Adapt or Suffer: Connecting Global Change to Local Impacts and Solutions.” Dr. Hayhoe was named *Time*’s 100 Most Influential People and *Fortune*’s 50 World’s Greatest Leaders. She also appeared on Good Morning America the day after our conference! She had the most memorable quote of the event, “we are the first generation to see climate change and the last generation to do something about it.” She explained that weather goes up and down day to day, but climate is what happens in the long term. Climate is the average weather over a 30-year time period. It is affecting food, agriculture, ecosystems, native species, invasive, and water plants. She likened planning for the future by looking at the past to driving while looking through a rear-view mirror. It works until you come to a curve in the road. Now the climate is changing so fast that we are at that curve in the road. Spring is coming earlier, birds are migrating earlier, the growing season has lengthened by two weeks, ragweed season is getting longer by 1-3 weeks, and the increasing carbon dioxide increases the growth rate of weeds and vines. She recommended that we look up “Global Weirding Videos.” The timing and range of plant hardiness zones are changing. Bird ranges have moved an average of 40 miles north. Invasive species such as fire ants, ticks and kudzu are proliferating in the warming climate. The center of blueberry production has moved north to Quebec. Climate and weather events are exacerbated. Extreme heat and extreme precipitation are more frequent. Hurricanes are slower and bigger, atmospheric rivers are phenomena in the West causing severe rain. Fires have been breaking records and burning twice as much area. It is real, it is us, it is serious and the window to deal with it is closing fast. While many people do believe in climate change, statistics show few believe it is affecting them presently. (For more information see Katharine Hayhoe’s [TED talk](#).)

David Yarnold, President and CEO of the National Audubon Society gave a talk on “What Birds Tell Us About Climate Change.” David began with a quote by Dr. Thomas Lovejoy: “If you take care of the birds, you take care of most of the big problems in the world. “There are currently 314 species of birds on the brink. Some will go extinct and some will adapt. Suggested ways to act include: keep cats inside: 1.2 billion birds are killed by cats, join the Dark Skies movement and turn lights out at night, and plant plants for insects and birds. You are what hope looks like to a bird! Check out their [website](#) to see what native plants you can plant to help birds and pollinators. As the GCA has a MOU (Memo of Understanding) with The National Audubon Society, they have a link to their native plant database on the GCA website on the conservation landing page under “Take Action” then under “Plant Native Plants.”

[Dr. Toddi Steelman](#), Dean of the Nicholas School of the Environment at Duke University and wild fire expert gave a talk titled “Fixing Fire, Fixing Ourselves.” I learned from her that we now have “fire years” not “fire seasons.” Fires are so intense now that firefighters are at a loss on how to put them out.

Food writer [Mark Bittman](#) addressed “Food- How We Got Here and Where We Should Go.” His advice: eat more plants and less of everything else and you will live better and longer. Eat more plants from the food kingdom this week than last week. If given the choice between consuming an organically-raised hamburger and a non-organic apple—eat the apple.

Janis Jones, CEO of the [Ocean Conservancy](#) in Portland OR talked on “The Ocean Garden – Our Changing Marine Environment and How We Can Work Together for its Future.” Oceans and garden are inextricably linked. I learned that oceans have been absorbing climate change for years and they are really showing signs of it now. There is about a garbage truck of plastic a minute going into the ocean. At home, we can help by advocating for reduce plastic use.

Dr. Diane Lewis and SaSa Panarese, GCA Conservation Committee Chairman, gave an update on the [Great Healthy Yard Project](#). It is about why and how we need to stop using chemicals in our own yards, “an emerald green yard is not a sign of success.” Homeowners use 10x more chemicals per acre than farmers do. What we do at home really matters. Household chemicals are the biggest source of pollutants in our water. They encouraged us all to participate in this project.

Allison Rockefeller gave a presentation on the History and Importance on Women in Conservation – she is the Founding Chair of the Rachel Carson Award and the founder of the [National Audubon Women in Conservation Program](#). Allison inspired us with a movie about the history of women in conservation. Rachel Carson transformed the land preservation ethic of Teddy Roosevelt to the current environmentalism and protection of our quality of life. She noted that 70% of high school valedictorians, 67% of college graduates, 50% of Ph.D.’s are women. There are currently 500K more women than men in the United States!

GCA’s own Leslie Fogg moderated a panel on the [Botany Bill](#). The panel consisted of Dr. Kayri Havens, Director of the [Chicago Botanic Garden](#), Dr. Carrie Barratt, President of the [New York Botanical Garden](#) and Dr. Ari Novy President and CEO of the [San Diego Botanic Garden](#) and 2007 recipient of the GCA Caroline Thorn Kissel Summer Environmental Studies Scholarship. GCA considers itself “the voice for plants.” The panel covered the threats to plants and what the Botany Bill will address. For example, The Bureau of Land Management is the largest seed purchaser in the world, and we need more native seed to restore native landscapes. Plants make up 60% of endangered species but receive 4% of funding. Botanists are also endangered! The BLM has 1 botanist/ 4.6 million acres.

Mark Falzone, President of [Scenic America](#) gave an update on the Scenic American Byways Act. The House of Representatives passed a bill to restart the dormant National Scenic Byways Program, while companion legislation was introduced in the Senate. Scenic America, along with the GCA and other organizations were instrumental in helping move the legislation through the House. The GCA sent out a full Call to Action to members on this topic and our members responded by reaching out to their House of Representative members requesting support for this Act. The Senate bill, S. 349, also enjoys bipartisan support and is sponsored by Sen. Susan Collins, (R-ME) and Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD). The GCA Legislative Priorities were set out into Narrative Talking Points for delegates’ visits to Capitol Hill. Each subject had talking points for both the Senators and Representatives.

After all the speakers presented on the Educational Day and the 2019 Legislative Priorities had been explained, Zones broke out into sessions to determine what exactly they wanted to address with their Senators and Representatives. Each club is autonomous from the GCA, so they were urged to pick and choose which legislative priorities they wanted to talk about to their Congressmen/women.

On Monday evening, we had a lovely Zone 1 dinner discussing the day’s events.

On Tuesday, we met in the Congressional Auditorium of the Capitol Visitor’s Center. We had time to go over both the NAL and the Conservation Landing Page on the GCA Website. Importantly, we heard from an equal number of Democratic and Republican Senators and Representatives including:

Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR)

Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R – PA)

Rep. Lee Zeldin (R – NY, 1st District)

Sen. John Boozman (R – AR)

Rep. Derek Kilmer (D-WA, 5th District)

Rep. Tom Suozzi (D-NY, 3rd District)

Sen. Shelley Capito (R-WV)

Sen. Todd Young (R-IN)

Rep. Jared Huffman (D-CA, 2nd District)

Rep. Garrett Graves (R-LA, 6th District)

Rep. Mike Quigley (D-IL, 5th District)

Rep. Donald McEachin (D-VA, 4th District)

Rep. French Hill (R-AR, 2nd District)

Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD)

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI)

On Wednesday, the Delegates went to meet with their Representatives and Senators. I meet with Sen. Warren's office, Sen. Markey's office, and Rep. McGovern. We had a very successful morning presenting our Botany Bill, [LWCF](#) (which was passed while we were there!), [Scenic Byways Bill](#), and [National Parks Bill](#). We also discussed how the topic of **Climate Change** is of utmost concern and how we are opposed to proposed EPA regulatory rollbacks and drilling in the Arctic National Refuge ([ANWR](#)).



2019 NAL Conference – A Success! I encourage new members to attend next year!