

Public Diplomacy Experience: US Environmental Diplomacy

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For nearly a decade, experts inside and outside of the United States government have been actively debating how to better engage the world through public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is the set of practices and actions by which a state seeks to inform and influence citizens of foreign countries in ways that promote its national interest. Since September 11, 2001, policymakers have increasingly acknowledged that anti-American sentiment can be viral, creating norms and spurring actions that threaten the United States and the security of our allies. So ‘environmental diplomacy’ remains nascent and contested in terms of definitions. For mainstream international relations scholars, the definitional frame is around negotiations between nation-states on environmental governance.

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Introduction

President Barack Obama was acutely conscious of global perception of the United States during the Bush administration; in 2009, President Obama signaled that public diplomacy would have a central place in his administration. By publicly denouncing torture, promising to close Guantánamo within a year, engaging Muslim communities through the 2009 Cairo Speech, endeavoring to secure a nuclear weapons-free world, and voicing a multilateral approach to foreign policy, President Obama positively reset America’s place in the international system. Geopolitical complications and bureaucratic realities, however, can easily eclipse goodwill rhetoric and public diplomacy action. As of the time of publication, Guantánamo is still open, the Obama administration has escalated the war in Afghanistan, and a global financial crisis has affected millions of foreign citizens.

In the Marshall Islands, they call that feeding frenzy an “unok”. That simple word describes the big fish forcing the little ones to the surface where they are dive bombed by sea birds. Seeing a healthy marine environment is one of the great joys on Earth.

In my eighth grade environment class in 1972, rather than write a paper, our teacher encouraged us to do field work. I chose to work alongside and interviewed a Chesapeake Bay oysterman. I learned how the oysters filter the water and the vital role oysters play in the Bay’s health. I also learned it is cold, wet, hard work! In college, in 1978-1979, I worked on a charter fishing boat, the *Breezin’ Thru*. Captain Harry told me about the old days when he would see acres of fish feeding on the surface of the bay. That image stayed with me.

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Figure 1. Marshall Islands seaenvironment.

Many environmentalists trace their awareness back to youthful encounters with nature. My experiences on the Chesapeake stayed with me, first as a journalist, and then as an environment, science, and technology officer with the State Department from 1993 to 1999. Former Marshall Islands Foreign Minister Tony deBrum had a much more impactful defining moment. He grew up with whales and dolphins and all manner of marine life, but at age of five years, he witnessed the “Castle Bravo” nuclear test in 1954, one of 67 nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands during the Cold War. Tests were conducted from 1948-1946 to 1958. The Castle Bravo test was the most powerful, at 250 megatons. The test was stronger than expected and the winds carried radioactivity to inhabited Marshallese islands. Tony deBrum said the flash from the blast was like seeing a second sunrise. Tony deBrum died of cancer in 2017, but his environmental legacy lives on. He championed one of the world’s largest shark sanctuaries, he crusaded against nuclear proliferation, and he was one of the leaders of the climate summit in Paris, leading the “high ambition coalition” of countries hoping to set strong climate goals to keep sea levels from rising and swamping low lying island countries like the Marshalls. As ambassador to the Marshall Islands from 2012-2016, I did not always agree with Tony, but I loved hearing his stories of the old days, and since I was there during the Obama administration we had a common cause in climate change.

What could I do from the Marshall Islands to support President Obama’s and Secretary Kerry’s climate agenda? Not much I thought. Then, a documentary filmmaker friend of mine asked if there was someone from the Marshalls he could interview for his next film. He planned to film at the UN Climate Summit coming up in New York and mentioned that the UN was looking for a Civil Society Speaker to address the heads of state. Booyah! I knew just the person. Not Tony, the UN was looking for a private citizen, but a young Marshallese poet named Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner. I nominated Kathy and sent in her poem, “Tell Them”. The selection committee was reviewing more than 500 applicants for the September 2014 performance. When they saw Kathy’s poem a few of them wiped away tears and said, “We’ve found our speaker”.

The poem reads in part:

tell them
 we only have one road
 and after all this
 tell them about the water
 how we have seen it rising
 flooding across our cemeteries
 gushing over the sea walls
 and crashing against our homes
 tell them what it's like
 to see the entire ocean __level__ with the land

 tell them
 we are afraid
 tell them we don't know
 of the politics
 or the science
 but tell them we see
 what is in our own backyard

 tell them that some of us
 are old fishermen who believe that God
 made us a promise
 some of us
 are more skeptical of God

 but most importantly tell them
 we don't want to leave
 we've never wanted to leave
 and that we
 are nothing without our islands.

Kathy's poem at the United Nations, still being composed the morning of the performance, was called "Dear MatafelePenem" and brought world leaders to their feet. The poem was dedicated to her daughter and was part of the momentum that set the stage for the Climate Accord in Paris.

In "Tell Them", she says "We've never wanted to leave". That line refers to the evacuation of Bikini, and the fact that although King Juda of Bikini told the Navy "It is in God's Hands", the use of the Marshalls as a testing ground was a foregone conclusion. The United States determined testing was necessary for our national security during the Cold War. Now, with sea level rise threatening the Marshall Islands national security, it is our time for us to reciprocate.

You could say this sounds, like an ambassador who has gone native. What do we care if sea levels rise a meter or two? If you want hard power reasons for limiting climate change, I can name two in the Marshall Islands alone. One is the Ronald Reagan Space and Missile Defense facility on Kwajalein. The U.S. launches intercontinental ballistic missiles from Vandenberg Air Base in California that are tracked and targeted to land in the lagoon in Kwajalein. The base is one of the jewels in the U.S. defense architecture. The missiles deter North Korea and could be deployed in the case of hostilities. The second reason is that the Runit Dome nuclear repository in the Marshall Islands could be swamped by rising seas. Runit is the concrete capped dome that encapsulates nuclear waste from some of the tests. If seas rise, the dome could be swamped. I do not think that would endanger the world as some alarmist news features purport, but it would not be good and would be yet

another failing to secure nuclear material, a theme in the global nuclear legacy. The Marshall Islands is one of the main transshipment points for tuna, and the marine life is stunning.

Scuba diving around the world I have seen sharks, rays, turtles, barracuda, and morays but never the abundance I saw in the Marshall Islands. Fish do not need passports, so improving the health of the global seas and giving future generations a chance to see these marine wonders has to be an international effort, with environmental diplomacy working to find common ground.



Figure 2. Ambassador Armbruster relocating coral from a construction site.

To be an environmentalist, you really only need one credential—to want a better future for the next generation. There are real challenges but I am optimistic, especially because young people get it. If the Parkland generation has taught us anything, it is that once they get hold of an issue, look out world! And the climate issue is not going away, thanks to poets like Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, statesmen like Tony Brum, and eighth grade teachers all over the country.

I am also optimistic because of what I have seen the U.S. do. As Polar Affairs Officer (1993-1995), I saw the U.S. take the lead in the creation of the Arctic Council, a now powerful alliance of all Arctic countries dedicated to the environment and indigenous issues. And as Nuclear Affairs Officer in Moscow (1997-1999), I worked on U.S. programs to safeguard Russian nuclear material and to take highly enriched uranium from Russian nuclear missile and blend it into low enriched uranium to burn in American nuclear plants. Environment, science and technology issues are national security issues. The Pentagon continues to keep an eye on climate change as a driver of conflict. The U.S. has the expertise and resources to lead in environmental diplomacy. Environmental issues may not always get first priority, but they are not going away.

And there is one more reason for hope. I have been to Bikini, the site of some of the most destructive nuclear bomb blasts ever conducted on Earth. And the marine environment is thriving. It is enough that the Discovery Channel went to Bikini to film Shark Week 2016. They were amazed by the hundreds of sharks they saw. Nature can come back if we let it and if we each do our part. Tony Brum once said in the United Nations, “Each one of us is responsible for a drop of ocean. You take care of that drop, and he takes care of his drop, and she takes care of her drop, we can take care of the world”.

Conclusion

What is true at the macro-level of international relations is also true at the micro-level of environmental conflict resolution processes. Environmental diplomacy will always have scientific underpinnings and there is clearly a level of analytical rigor which research can bring to refining this field of international relations. Many more doctoral dissertations need to be written to further inform and refresh the debate on mechanisms for reforming the environmental diplomatic system. While global governance systems remain elusive, environmental diplomacy can at least provide a prototype for how human institutions can transcend tribalism, catalyze peace-building and sustain- able development, and gain further acceptance within the annals of diplomacy.

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