



Department of
Environmental
Conservation

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE REPORT

Fall 2023

FIRST DIRECTOR OF DEC'S OFFICE OF INDIAN NATION AFFAIRS – PETER REUBEN

Welcome to the Department of Environmental Conservation's (DEC's) first-ever Director of the Office of Indian Nation Affairs (OINA), Peter Reuben! As Director of OINA, Peter will bring his life experiences, perspectives, and a passion for the environment to this new position.

Peter heads to OINA from DEC's Division of Environmental Remediation, having joined the agency in 2006 as an Environmental Chemist. He brings an impressive combination of education and



Peter Reuben, Director of the Office of
Indian Nation Affairs

experience to his new role, including more than 15 years working closely with Indian Nations on a wide range of critically important environmental projects and cultural issues.

From 2011–2013, Peter served as Brownfield Cleanup Program Manager for

the Seneca Nation of Indians Environmental Protection Department, where he developed and implemented an EPA-approved Brownfields Tribal Response Program and successfully secured an EPA hazardous waste management grant. He served as a consultant to the Haudenosaunee Environmental Task Force and the Tonawanda Seneca and Tuscarora Nations. In 2012, Peter was elected Vice-Chair of the Tribal Waste and Response Assistance Program's National Steering Committee.

Peter holds a Master of Arts in Chemistry from the State University of New York at Buffalo's Great Lakes Center for Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry, where he conducted novel multistep organic synthesis in support of fundamental cancer research.

Once a program under the Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ), OINA was officially created in August 2022. OINA works to address environmental concerns and cultural resources, and advance shared knowledge through consultation with State and federally recognized Indian Nations. The office combines cultural affairs, historic preservation, and consultation with Indian Nations into one team to focus DEC's consultation and engagement with Indian Nations in New York. Consultation and engagement with New York's nine State and federally recognized Indian Nations is a priority for DEC, and the creation of OINA builds upon the relationships and long history DEC has had with Indigenous Nations. OINA and OEJ will continue to work closely together to advance equity and justice priorities at DEC.

For more information on OINA, visit www.dec.ny.gov/public/125980.html.

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

While food deserts and food insecurity are a growing issue in many urban and low-income communities, the Newburgh Farm and Food Initiative (NUFFI) is actively working to combat this environmental and public health risk. NUFFI is an organization working with a network of volunteers to foster a resilient community and ensure fresh food is available and accessible to all.

Located in the City of Newburgh, NUFFI grows fresh and healthy produce for residents at the Downing Park Urban Farm (DPUF), and offers youth agricultural education and employment programs, workshops, and volunteer opportunities. As stated on their website,

“NUFFI empowers residents to take ownership of their own lives, health and community.”

Approximately 80 percent of the produce grown at DPUF is donated to 15 programs that feed more than 7,800 people per month in Newburgh. In addition to addressing food insecurity by making food donations, the farm is participating in two programs: the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Orange County SNAP-Ed Fruit and Vegetable Prescription program and the “Feeding Our Elderly Neighbors” project. With the SNAP-Ed program, residents who are identified as food insecure by their physicians may bring vouchers to DPUF for up to \$120 in free fruits and vegetables. The “Feeding Our Elderly Neighbors” project increases access for residents who lack accessibility due to age, health-related issues, or lack of transportation.

In 2020, the pandemic exposed the vulnerability of the nation’s food system and we saw the food-insecure population climb sharply. With so many people out of work and food pantries struggling to keep up with demand, community gardens in underserved communities, like NUFFI, became more important than ever. Thousands of pounds of produce grown at DPUF and distributed included vegetables that addressed the ethnic needs of Newburgh residents. This includes culturally significant foods like cilantro, tomatillos, radishes, Malabar (Caribbean) spinach, collards, kale, callaloo (amaranth), and an assortment of lettuces.

Another way of helping the community is to empower by educating and providing the tools to flourish, which NUFFI does through education programs. DPUF welcomes youth and adults who are interested in learning more about agriculture and provides various programs and workshops, such as an Urban Soils workshop, a Food Waste Recycling and Composting Workshop, a pollinator program, and programs about the farm, including



Produce for sale at Downing Park Urban Farm (DPUF)



Aerial view of DPUF

how food is grown. For those interested in growing their own food, NUFFI also supports installation of community or residential gardens by providing guidance and supplies. To date, NUFFI has actively supported the success of 11 community gardens.

With the aid of a DEC Office of Environmental Justice Community Impact Grant, NUFFI was able to build their network to support the community of Newburgh. Moving forward, NUFFI continues to improve the environmental health of DPUF, expand the farm’s growing capacity, increase educational programs, and empower their community.

For more information on the OEJ Community Impact Grant, visit <https://www.dec.ny.gov/public/31226.html>.



Students planting a pear tree at DPUF.

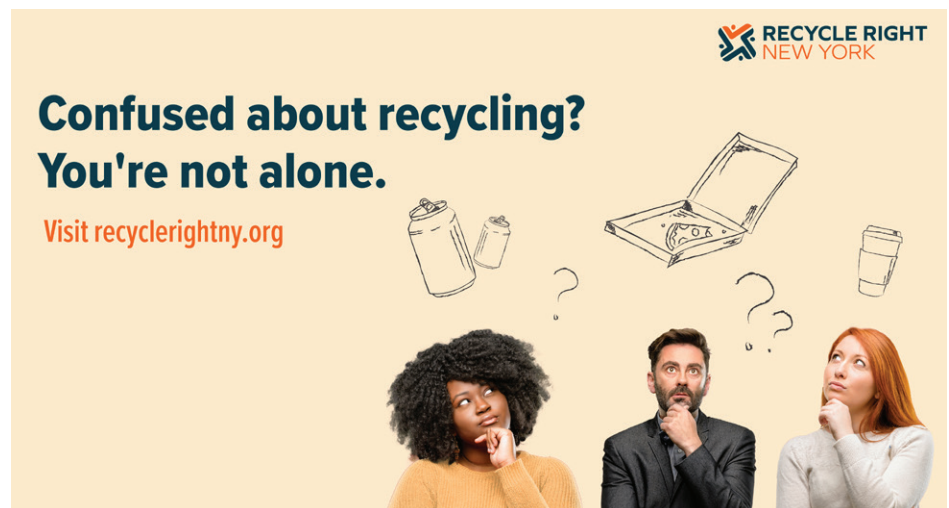
SUSTAINABILITY IN ANY SEASON

You may have heard about “Plastic Free July,” a month dedicated to reducing the use of plastic. Why not build sustainable habits into your daily routine year-round?

You may be inspired by the Plastic Free July initiative of the Plastic Free Foundation, founded by Rebecca Prinz-Ruiz and a small team in local government in Western Australia. Though the movement started out small, it now has people participating worldwide with the goal of reducing the amount of plastic waste to conserve natural resources, fight climate change, and keep the environment clean.

Take the following steps to help limit your own plastic consumption:

REDUCE: Reducing the amount of single-use plastic is the first step in the effort to become more sustainable. One way is to reduce what you buy. Ask yourself if you really need the item. If yes, are there other options with less packaging or an alternative made from recycled materials? Avoiding any unnecessary packaging when making purchases means you don’t have to figure out what to do with it later. Refusing single-use plastic cutlery and takeaway containers as well as buying in bulk and avoiding prepackaged foods are ways to help reduce items that will become waste.



REUSE: For items you already have, there are a few things you can do before sending them to the landfill. Reuse items as much as possible before letting them go. Plastic cutlery and takeaway containers can be washed and reused again and again. Repurposing items can also extend their lives in your home with the added bonus of not needing to purchase new items. There are many DIY and crafting resources that can inspire new uses for items in your home. Who wouldn’t want to save money and be able to customize things? Another option is to bring gently used items to a thrift store so that someone else can use them and give them a new home and a second life.

RECYCLE: When those options have been exhausted or are not viable, then recycle the items that are recyclable. Though not all plastics are recyclable, many items are—even more than you may think! Knowing what can be recycled is important as it will ensure more items are recycled. When items that cannot be recycled are mixed with those that can, it may contaminate the recyclable items, which decreases their value, slows the process of sorting and recycling, and can even damage equipment and injure workers. You may be asking: But what can be recycled and how do I find out? Recycle Right NY is a collaborative outreach and education campaign with the goal of guiding people through the recycling process. The Recycle Right NY website can help you figure out what items can be recycled and if those items are recycled where you live, by sharing local recycling guidelines. Anything that cannot be reused or recycled goes to the landfill.

Don't wait for the next Plastic Free July to start; it's never too late to participate in this global movement to build new habits and continue to make positive changes. No matter how small, every step makes a difference. Don't forget to share any tips and tricks you've learned with others as we continue to help the environment and our communities.

"Imperfect action is better than perfect inaction." Often credited to President Harry Truman, this is a great quote to keep in mind as you begin your journey to sustainable living!

For more information on the Plastic Free July initiative, resources, and tips to reduce your plastic use year-round, visit www.plasticfreejuly.org. To learn more about recycling and find resources on recycling plastics, visit recyclerightny.org/. Check out these DEC pages for other resources to aid in your journey toward sustainability: www.dec.ny.gov/public/337.html and www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/294.html.

DEC'S COMMUNITY AIR MONITORING INITIATIVE WINS AWARD

DEC was recently awarded a 2023 Google Cloud Customer Award in the Technology for Good Awards-Sustainability category for the Statewide Community Air Monitoring Initiative that began in the summer of 2022. The Google Cloud Customer Sustainability Awards "recognize customers with new and innovative solutions to accelerate sustainability within their own organizations and drive meaningful climate action."

DEC's air monitoring initiative collects block-level air pollution data using mobile mapping technology and professional analytics from Aclima, run on Google Cloud. The goal is to identify sources of air pollution within the 10 disadvantaged communities across New York State identified as having a disproportionate air pollution burden and to develop strategies to reduce that pollution. The 10 communities chosen include Buffalo/Niagara Falls/Tonawanda, Capital Region, Bronx, Manhattan, Rochester, Syracuse, Mount Vernon/Yonkers/New Rochelle, Brooklyn, Queens, and Hempstead/New Cassel/Roosevelt/Uniondale/Westbury.

Now that the data collection is complete, the next step is to verify and validate the preliminary data and develop a report that will be made available to the public. All information, including community input, mobile monitoring data, and other air monitoring and emissions data, will be used to inform pollutant reduction strategies. DEC continues to engage local elected leaders, community-based organizations, and interested citizens to encourage public collaboration throughout this initiative. To share feedback and recommendations on reduction strategies, please join your local community advisory committees.

For more information about DEC's Community Air Monitoring Initiative or questions about advisory committees, visit: www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/125320.html.



DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos speaking at the launch of the Community Air Monitoring Initiative in South Bronx last summer.

SUMMER SNAPSHOTS

PRIDE PARADE

On June 25, DEC staff from across the state gathered for the very first time in New York City to celebrate PrideFest. Marching 1.5 miles through Manhattan during the City's Pride Parade, DEC staff and their families celebrated in solidarity to fight the social stigma associated with identifying as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. It was a great turnout, and everyone is excited for future marches!



DEC staff at PrideFest (left) in Manhattan; DEC staff marching in the Pride Parade for the first time (right).

TIMBUCTOO

From July 10–August 18, 48 high school students from New York City were given an opportunity to head to the Adirondacks to participate in a pilot program that taught about environmental and social justice issues through the lens of climate change. This program, called the Timbuctoo Climate Science and Careers Summer Institute (Timbuctoo Institute), was launched by the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF), partnered with CUNY's Medgar Evers College.

Over three two-week sessions, these high school sophomores and juniors were introduced to climate science, offered career exploration, and addressed issues of access from an equity and justice perspective. Students visited Medgar Evers College, the ESF campus in Syracuse, and the Adirondack Ecological Center in Newcomb. They also met professionals in careers focused on the environment, including DEC's Deputy Commissioner for Equity and Justice Adriana Espinoza, Office of Indian Nation Affairs Coordinator Beynan Ransom, Director of Outdoor Recreation Laura DiBetta, and Forest Rangers Paul Quinones and John Scott. Each DEC representative spoke about their role within the agency. The Timbuctoo Institute is free to student participants, and each receive a stipend of \$1,000 after completing the program. With the success of this inaugural season, program coordinators are hopeful for expansion of the program.



DEC Deputy Commissioner for Equity and Justice Adriana Espinoza, Indian Nation Affairs Coordinator Beynan Ransom (above), and Forest Ranger Paul Quinones (below) speaking to students at the Timbuctoo Climate Science and Careers Summer Institute.



OPERATION ECO-QUALITY-PESTICIDES

After weeks of conducting educational outreach in the Washington Heights community of uptown Manhattan, the enforcement phase of the new Operation ECO-Quality pesticides campaign began. In a joint effort of DEC's Region 2 OEJ, Environmental Conservation Police, and Bureau of Pesticide Management staff from Regions 1 and 2, more than 4,250 illegal pesticides products were seized from street vendors.

One significant danger of illegal or unregistered pesticides is their unknown toxicity levels. They may contain toxic chemicals that can cause serious harm to human health, such as cancer, birth defects, neurological disorders, and acute poisoning. Unregistered pesticides are not regulated by any authority, which means they do not undergo proper testing and analysis before they are marketed. The DEC team focused on pesticides that were not registered with the EPA, as well as various restricted-use products, that should not be available for purchase, possession, or use by the public.

DEC did not issue violations to the vendors. Instead, staff focused on educating sellers and the public, providing written information in both English and Spanish about the harm and health issues illegal pesticides can cause and the laws and regulations regarding safe pesticide use in New York State.



Illegal pesticides seized from street vendors in Washington Heights.

BOND ACT LISTENING SESSIONS

More than 1,000 New Yorkers attended the 10 sessions of the Clean Water, Clean Air and Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act listening tour! Governor Kathy Hochul launched the tour in Buffalo on May 30 and nine additional in-person and virtual sessions were held across the state throughout the summer, engaging stakeholders and other interested New Yorkers. These sessions provided an opportunity to learn about the Bond Act and the types of projects it can support, and to begin discussions on the guidelines being developed to identify potential projects.

New York State created a web-based survey, beginning in July and ending on September 30, to collect potential project ideas for the next phase of involvement and gauge the interests and needs of communities—



Environmental Bond Act listening session at the University at Buffalo (left); Deputy Commissioner for Equity and Justice Adriana Espinoza answering questions during the Bond Act listening session in Brooklyn (right).

particularly those most vulnerable to pollution and climate impacts—to provide opportunities for feedback on existing funding mechanisms or new programs. Survey information and other ongoing funding updates and opportunities will be posted to the Bond Act website at www.ny.gov/BondAct. To learn more about this \$4.2-billion landmark initiative, view the recordings of the two virtual meetings, and look up general information about existing State and federal funding programs that complement Bond Act objectives and could help leverage Bond Act funds. Interested individuals can also join a mailing list for updates at BondAct@dec.ny.gov.

DEC DAY AT SUNY ESF

DEC joined SUNY ESF students, faculty, and staff for the first DEC @ ESF Day on September 15. DEC staff from around 20 different divisions and offices spoke to students about their career paths via panel sessions and a tabling event. The day kicked off with a welcome and conversation with DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos and SUNY ESF Executive Director for Strategic Initiatives Matthew Millea. Dozens of students attended the event, with many



getting a chance to understand the connections to their educational and research studies through the support that DEC provides for the State within their programs. There are currently more than 600 ESF alumni that work at DEC, and we hope to continue strengthening the relationship between the school and the agency as we inspire the next generation of environmental stewards.



DEC's Equity and Justice staff meeting with students during a DEC @ ESF Day panel session and tabling event.

Those in attendance from the DEC Equity and Justice team were Peter Reuben, Kayla Baker, Kerri Pickard-DePriest, Dana McClure, and Marilyn Moore.

DEC would like to thank all those in attendance and those who facilitated the event, including the SUNY ESF Office of Career Services, Division of Student Affairs, SUNY ESF Facilities, Operations and Services, and the audio/visual team for their support. Special thanks to Casey Duffy (SUNY ESF Associate Director, Office of Career Services) and Kristine Ellsworth (DEC Environmental Engineer, Division of Materials Management) for planning and organizing the event.

ESF's announcement of the event found here: http://www.esf.edu/news/2023/dec_cay_at_esf.php.

APPLY FOR FUNDING

Are you a community-based organization looking to fund a project? OEJ offers grants to not-for-profit organizations to address environmental harms in low income and environmental justice communities. For additional information on OEJ grants and a complete list of previous project awardees, please visit our website: www.dec.ny.gov/public/31226.html.

WE CAN'T DO IT WITHOUT YOU

Do you have concerns about the environment where you live? Do you want to make your voice heard? Do you want to stay informed about the different environmental issues affecting the state of New York?

JOIN OUR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE LISTSERV

Go to: www.dec.ny.gov/public/65855.html and sign up to receive regular updates from the Office of Environmental Justice. Stay current on the issues that are important to you. As always, you can contact the Office of Environmental Justice with any concerns by sending an e-mail to: justice@dec.ny.gov. Please include:

- Your location/address
- City, town, village or borough
- The environmental concerns you wish to address
- List the potential source, if you know
- How or whether you wish to be contacted

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Contact us:

DEC Office of Environmental Justice
625 Broadway, 14th Floor
Albany, NY 12233-1500

518-402-8556 justice@dec.ny.gov

EJ Hotline 1-866-229-0497

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