

Episode 4: Hemp and the Green Path

Audio from Standing Rock protests.

Winona LaDuke:

It's time to end the fossil fuel infrastructure. We could spend our lives fighting one pipeline after another after another but someone needs to challenge the problem. My perspective is that \$3.9 billion dollar pipeline - these guys don't need a pipeline. What these guys need is solar. What they need is wind. They need housing that works for people. They need energy justice. This is this chance America to say "Look, this community does not need a pipeline. What this community needs is real energy independence."

Alie: That was audio from Standing Rock, what activist Winona LaDuke called a "Selma moment" for those who were there.

Ava: Welcome to Trace Material, a podcast from Parsons Healthy Materials Lab. We're continuing our exploration of all things hemp. I'm Ava.

Alie: And I'm Alie. So far this season, we've taken you on a deep dive into the world of hemp. We've really dug into the nitty gritty. But today, we're backing up a little bit to look at the context. We know hemp has the potential to change our world, but what is it exactly about our world that needs to change?

Ava: You just heard clips from Standing Rock and activist Winona LaDuke. Part of what she thinks needs to change is our dependence on fossil fuels. In 2016 and into 2017, indigenous groups from across the country gathered at Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota to protest the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, an underground oil pipeline that threatened to contaminate the drinking water of the Reservation.

Alie: The protests at Standing Rock brought the fight over the future of fossil fuels into the public eye. On one side, indigenous peoples protecting their water and land and on the other side, corporations supported by the American military.

Ava: Currently, our global energy economy is fed by fossil fuels. And as you've probably heard, that won't be possible forever - or according to many experts, it won't be possible for much longer at all.

Alie: And if fossil fuels is a vague term to you, don't worry, you're not alone. Fossil fuels include oil, otherwise known as petroleum, natural gas and coal. These are all finite substances that were created millions of years ago. Since the mid-19th century, we've used these natural resources to fuel our cars, heat our homes, and produce just about every object you interact with on a daily basis. In less than two hundred years, we've taken pretty much all the earth has to offer.

Ava: So, the issue is not just that these natural resources are running out, it's that burning them is causing serious harm to our environment and our bodies. Today, we're going to talk about how we can move away from that fossil fuel economy. There are alternative forms of energy, but should we just jump ship and climb on the newest, shiniest source? Or is there a way to transition that accounts for the harm that has been done, not just to the planet, but to the communities who sacrificed to extract these resources? What would that transition look like?

Alie: To help us answer those questions, we're first going to turn to Winona LaDuke, who is an internationally renowned activist working on issues of sustainable development, renewable energy, and food systems. She lives and works on the White Earth reservation in northern Minnesota, and is a two time Vice Presidential candidate with Ralph Nader for the Green Party.

Ava: Back in November of 2019, Winona was the keynote speaker at our symposium Material Health: Design Frontiers. Her address was incredibly compelling and we wanted to share some of the key moments. We're not going to play the entire hour for you, so there will be some moments where we might jump in to fill in some gaps.

Alie: Here's Winona.

Winona LaDuke:

{Speaking in Ojibwe} I'm telling you where I'm from, which is a White Earth Reservation in Northern Minnesota. Y'all know where Minnesota is?

We were instructed to go to this place from the East Coast, we were instructed, we followed a shell which appeared in the sky to the place where the food grows upon the water. Those are some serious instructions. Our people harvested on that same lake for about 8,000 years. Two sticks and a canoe, you know, wild rice, minomen. And that's what a sustainable economy looks like. 8,000 varieties of corn. That's when America was great. Tremendous agrobiodiversity. Single largest migratory herd in the world was the Buffalo herd, 50 million Buffalo, you know, that's when America was great. America was great when passenger pigeons darkened in the skies and when you could drink the water from every river and creek and the sturgeon were in every Northern Lake. That's when America was great. So it's really important that we remember that. Don't change that narrative.

And so that's kind of my point here, because I'm a fossil fuel addict, we're all addicts. We live in this society that is terribly jacked up on fossil fuels and we're, we've grown pretty entitled to it.

What that looks like in a fossil fuel addiction is that you do all kinds of crazy things to make your fix. And so you do crazy things like it's called extreme extraction. The bottom of the barrel or the top of the mountain, you blow off the top of 500 mountains in Appalachia to sell that coal to somebody in India cause you ain't even burning it in the U S anymore. But that's like late stage capitalism at its best.

And that's kind of this American economy that we have. It's an aberration of an economic system because it is not in any way about wellbeing. It's about greed. And so my point is that now would be the time to start moving on before we have entire catastrophe in that. No time for the Renaissance like now, because my point is that this is what happens to civil society when corporations, the rights of corporations supersede the rights of individuals. And when water protectors are demonized and put under \$38 million dollars of military repression, that Standing Rock: a Selma moment for all of us who were there.

Ava: The fossil fuel addiction Winona is talking about, it's clearly hitting native communities incredibly hard. But it isn't an isolated problem. The addiction is seeping into every facet of our modern culture.

Alie: On our trip to Kentucky, the same trip that we visited Farmington Historic Plantation in episode 1, we met Peter Hille.

Peter Hille:

My name's Peter Hille. I'm the president of MACED. MACED is the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development. We're a 43 year old community development financial institution certified by the U S treasury.

Ava: Now, to talk about fossil fuels and our dependence on them, we could have gone anywhere. It isn't just former coal mining towns in Kentucky that have been ravaged by the fossil fuel industry. We could have gone to West Virginia, Montana, Louisiana, or Texas. Wherever you're standing right now, there's a story that connects that place to our fossil fuel addiction.

Alie: But we found ourselves in Kentucky. And as we were preparing for our trip to Farmington we heard about the great work of MACED. So we reached out to Peter and added a detour to the town of Berea. Berea's a fascinating town that sits in the Appalachian foothills right up against Eastern Kentucky coal country. But Berea doesn't look like the stereotype of a small Appalachian town. There's a thriving arts scene and it's home to Berea College, which was founded in 1855 as the first co-ed, racially integrated college in the South.

Ava: Berea has always been a place where boundaries are pushed. We sat down with Peter Hille to understand how the fossil fuel economy has shaped the community MACED supports in Kentucky, and how they might move forward.

Peter Hille:

We talk about the need for a just transition to a new economy for Appalachia because we recognize that the people of this region sacrificed for more than a century to literally fuel the growth of the entire nation. Rural places all over the world have sacrificed. And so places like this that have sacrificed to fuel the growth of the whole nation are now bearing the brunt of changes in the global energy economy.

Alie: Peter didn't invent the term, "Just Transition," it's a framework developed by trade unions, but we found his explanation of why one is needed particularly useful.

Peter Hille:

It has magnified the challenges that already existed in an area that had been subject to resource extraction for decades. The inevitable result of resource extraction and what economists call the "resource curse" is the extraction not only of the materials, but also of the wealth and the assets. And ultimately of the people. So when we talk about the sacrifice that regions like ours have made, we recognize that there's a debt that's owed and that debt can be repaid with the investments that are needed to build new economies in places like this.

Ava: And that, we believe is the crux of what makes a Just Transition. There's a debt that is owed to communities all across America that, as Peter said, have borne the brunt of the changes to the global economy. Both Peter and Winona believe it is time to move away from the fossil fuel economy and onto something new. But the new economy must be created thoughtfully.

Peter Hille:

The new economy has to be more diverse, resilient, sustainable, and equitable. And we know that the old economy was none of those things. There were enormous fortunes that have been made but those fortunes don't represent reinvestment back into the communities. They don't represent the accumulation of durable assets in the communities. Oftentimes the land has been owned by people who didn't live in the communities. The wealth that was generated by the resource extraction activities left with the resources.

Alie: Like Peter, Winona is interested in reinvesting in communities - primarily her own, the White Earth Reservation in Northern Minnesota. Although she speaks in different terms than Peter, she too is focused on creating a new economy that works for people who the current one has left behind.

Ava: We're taking you back to her keynote to hear about the economy she aims at creating. And, spoiler alert, hemp is the secret ingredient.

Winona LaDuke:

As I look at the world, you know there's different ways to put this, but there's an indigenous economy or a land based economy which reaffirms relationship to place is based on cyclical understanding, is based on a reciprocity and a gratitude that you take only what you need and you leave the rest and that if you are going to ensure that you can harvest in the years ahead, you will care well for your soil, you will care well for that which is there. And then there is a different economy which is based on taking without respect, is based on aggrandizing wealth and continuing to build and amass more and having no regard for the land or the people who live there.

And so what I want to do is to talk about how we are going to build a post petroleum economy. And that has to be built with something like hemp. And so I am particularly interested in fiber hemp for textiles. That's my interest and that's largely because most of what we wear today is either cotton or fossil fuels and an average tee shirt and jeans takes 5,000 gallons of water. On a worldwide scale, cotton represents 4% of the world's agricultural crops and 24% of the world's agricultural chemicals. That's a lot of fossil fuels that should not be put on land or in our water.

So I have been a hemp farmer for four years. But you know, I am also a farmer and for many years I have grown a traditional varieties of corn, beans, squash, potatoes, and tobacco. I'm a heritage farmer. And uh, about four years ago I decided that I wanted to grow hemp. And so my interest is in fiber hemp. And the reason I wanted to grow hemp is largely because of the material economy, facets of this a magical plant.

Ava: Winona got an early permit based off the 2014 farm bill to grow hemp, but restarting a dormant and dusty industry hasn't been simple. A reminder, hemp was effectively illegal from 1937 to 2014.

Winona LaDuke:

And so the state of Minnesota used to have 11 hemp mills in it. We grew our clothes, we manufactured our own rope, and we had an entire hemp economy. That was until the end of World War II, the passage of the Marihuana Prohibition Act when hemp was made illegal in this country. And so this country has suppressed hemp and in that suppression, other countries have moved ahead, but we have no hemp industry in this country.

So it's like forensic research or forensic mystery, trying to figure out how they did it because the industry has been illegal. So I'm interested in building a regional hemp industry that is indigenous owned and organic in the Northern Plains territory where there are people like me and my tribe that have thousands of acres of land and could do well to produce such a diverse crop that could give you food, it could give you fuel and it could give you textiles.

You know, CBDs and, and marijuana, they're awesome. But I'll tell you what fiber is going to change the world. You know, the materials, economies, which got tackle. And also what I'm going say is something, you know, which is you don't want to tackle the materials economy that is, which is as wasteful as the materials economy we have now. There's no point of making a bunch of single use hemp items when you need to remove single use products from your materials economy. You know, those are the things that we need to look at. I don't want to be in the business of making a bunch of straws.

Alie: Winona is working on creating a textile industry that will support the planet and her own community. She's building it on the bones of a forgotten local hemp industry, but will also look forward and build something very different than the current model based on extraction. There's no reason to create something that mirrors the fossil fuel industry. It isn't sustainable. It isn't working anymore. As she says, it's time to walk a different path.

Winona LaDuke:

In our prophecies as Anishinaabe People, long time ago, we are told that we would come to a point in our lives as Anishinaabe people where we'll be faced with a path with a fork in it. There'd be two paths ahead and they call this the time of the seventh fire. And in the time of the seventh fire, which is the time that we are in now, we are told that we would have a choice between two paths and one path they said would be well worn but it would be scorched and the other path would not be well worn and it would be green and it would be our choice upon which path to embark. So I'm pretty sure that that's not just for us. I'm pretty sure that this moment in time is this moment where we must take the initiative and have the courage to make that which is beautiful to make that green path, which is beautiful, which is about life and which is about our future generations, whether they have wings or fins or roots or paws.

Ava: Hemp isn't the only answer to our over-dependence on fossil fuels. It's just one of many answers. It might be true that hemp has over 25,000 uses, but the new economy shouldn't be based on only one resource like the fossil fuel economy is. It's time to diversify, and to do so justly.

Alie: On our next episode, we're going to dig into farming in a way that we haven't seen yet. Join us as we tour a hemp farm in - you guessed it - Kentucky. If you're wondering what the logistics are like re-creating an industry that the United States hasn't seen in the better part of a century, tune in next time, we're taking you to the wild west of the hemp world.

Ava: Trace Material is a project of Parsons Healthy Materials Lab at the New School. It is produced by me Ava Robinson, Alie Kilts, Burgess Brown and the HML team. Thank you to Winona LaDuke and Peter Hille for lending their voices, thoughts and experiences to this episode.