

Remarks by Buck O’Herin upon receiving NRCM’s 2024 People’s Choice Award

I want to thank NRCM for all the great work they do to protect Maine’s natural environment. They have been in the forefront of environmental work since 1959, eleven years before the first Earth Day! Had I known about them in 1959 when I was just five, I definitely would have sent my allowance. I also want to acknowledge my friends, the dedicated staff and board members at Midcoast Conservancy, and friends at the Hills to Sea Trail Coalition that I have had the privilege to work with during the past several years; it has been and continues to be a highlight in my life.

I have a couple of stories I want to share that I think speak to some essential ingredients that result in environmental work and right livelihood. The theme is connection.

When I was in graduate school for environmental education here in Maine, an assignment I received was to identify an experience in my life that may have led to my decision to choose a lucrative career in environmental education. After days of reflection, everyone identified an experience from when they were young such as a summer camp, family camping trips or the woods next to where they grew up, as being that influential experience. One person, Benjamin, grew up in urban Philadelphia where the unfettered natural world was in short supply. In his grandmother’s tiny backyard, sandwiched between buildings was an apple tree. Over many summers and falls, Benjamin, his siblings and cousins spent hours at a time sitting in the supportive branches of that solitary tree. Those experiences, Benjamin thought, had to be the reason.

The second story:

In 2004 after a devastating tsunami in Indonesia that killed more than 220,000 people, a story appeared in the news that made it onto CBS’s “60 Minutes” about the Moken, an indigenous people living on several small islands in the path of the tsunami. The Moken are fairly isolated, children learn to swim before they can walk, and fishing is central to their livelihoods. Still alive in their oral tradition are stories about the earth, its fluctuations and phenomena. When older Moken saw the signs presaging a giant wave they implored their people on land to move to higher ground and those in boats, to move to deeper water. According to the report, their villages were destroyed but not a single Moken died as a result of the tsunami. Their cultural and daily intimacy with the earth was still effectively intact and held stories essential to their survival.

The point of these stories is that it only takes a smidgeon of the natural world, even a single tree, to remind us of our connection to the big wide world and instill within us a desire to care for it; and that tuning out the cacophony of noise competing for our attention and tuning into--or feeling the stories emanating from the earth, will benefit us in many ways. At this point in our history, I’m pretty certain it will take each of us sharing these stories, patiently and compassionately with our communities, to avert a future we do not want and to ensure one that holds us.