

## CLIMATE JUSTICE NARRATIVE

*by Afrin Sopariwala  
August 2016*

“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

—Lilla Watson, Aboriginal elder, activist and educator from Queensland, Australia.

“Whatever man does to the web of life, he does to himself.

—Indian Proverb

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My gratitude to my friends and colleagues at Puget Sound and Latino Community Fund for your direction, guidance and support creating this narrative document. My deep appreciation and thanks to members of the community, Front & Centered (especially the communications team), everyone who participated in interviews, as well as everyone that is dedicated to our collective liberation. **You all inspire me.**

## **LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR**

*As a grassroots activist and public speaker, I know the importance of well-crafted messages to a campaign or action. Messages that are simple to understand, tailored to the audience, and grounded in the values and principles of the movement will have a deep impact on the audience.*

*With that in mind, this toolkit hopes to be a simple and easy to use guide to crafting effective messaging strategy for climate justice campaigns in Washington State.*

*Climate justice is a complicated subject to discuss because of its deep root causes, threatening impacts, and powerful enemies. Tackling the problem on its surface creates superficial solutions. True solutions originate from the hearts and spirit of the people who see all life on the planet as interconnected and interdependent.*

*Use this toolkit as a starting point. While I hope to paint a compelling picture of the climate justice narrative, this toolkit is not an exhaustive list of facts, solutions, or policies for tackling the climate crisis. Instead, it offers the core elements of a story and tools to craft a messaging strategy that is unified and rooted in our values.*

*The messages and vision featured in this toolkit stem from my personal experiences as a climate justice activist and a woman of color, as well as my many conversations, interviews, meetings, and workshops with powerful, inspiring leaders in our movement in the Pacific Northwest and beyond.*

*I hope this tool helps people working on different but intersecting issues to craft powerful messaging. Our movements for justice and a better future are the same.*

*Thank you for reading and doing your part in our united journey towards a better world.*

*With heart and spirit,*  
**Afrin Sopariwala**



## THE POWER OF NARRATIVE

Narrative is a values-based story about our core beliefs. Powerful narratives, used repeatedly over time, can change how people view the world and shape cultural common sense. Values and story are essential elements of narrative that move people.

Stories are a powerful part of the human experience. In fact, our brains evolved to process information in story form. A story framework allows us to unite our messages and achieve repetition of our values. Repetition is key in today's world of digital-chaos and over-information. Further, a story shows us the path to achieving the world we want, while making us believe it is possible.

Whether your issue is directly climate related, or intersectionally connected to climate justice, this toolkit can help you create messaging that will keep our work unified and collectively moving forward.

## WHY THIS TOOLKIT IS NEEDED

As communities of color and communities with low-income levels and wealth, our voices and stories have been ignored, unrepresented, and missing in the mainstream environmental narrative. Considering climate change is an issue of economic and racial injustice, it is critical that the solutions and vision come from the communities most affected and that our stories and voices are heard.

Over the last several years, many communities of color and grassroots groups in Washington State have done great work on environmental issues. However, a strong, unified narrative has been missing. This toolkit aims to fill that gap.

## HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

The following pages provide talking points and strategies based on research and interviews with leaders and members from the community.

Before to using this tool, it's important to **analyze and know your target audience**. Most campaigns are crafted with a specific audience in mind and audience segmentation should be a standard communications practice. Connect emotionally with your audience.

Last, a narrative works when it's **repeated**. Each narrative element has been written to ensure that it works right now, while also building the power of participation over time. Using these actual words will help advance our values and message today, and for the future. While it's not possible to integrate every element of the narrative into each message, all messages should be consistent with the overall story you're trying to tell. **Repetition is crucial**.

## UNPACKING CLIMATE JUSTICE:

Before exploring the messaging recommendations described in later sections, it's key to define our terms. Below is a brief explanation of the term climate justice, as it's used in this document.

**Climate justice frames the environmental crisis as an economic, racial and political issue, rather than one that is purely environmental or physical in nature.**

“Climate justice is a movement which makes the connection between our environment and our economic crises. Climate justice focuses on the root causes of both -- out of control global capitalism, deeply embedded structural racism and other inequities-- and calls for solutions which center the priorities and the voices of the most impacted communities. - Our People Our Planet Our Power Report by Got Green and Puget Sound Sage, 2016.

## DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACTS

Climate change affects everyone. But it affects some of us more than others. People of color and communities with low-income levels and wealth are disproportionately affected by climate change impacts. Environmental racism is another factor that affects people of color. Hazardous, toxic and polluting industries like oil refineries and mines, or radioactive waste sites are almost always located near where communities of color and indigenous people live. As a consequence, these communities suffer shorter life spans, higher infant and adult mortality, poor health, poverty, diminished economic opportunities, substandard housing, and an overall degraded quality of life.

## INTERSECTING OPPRESSIONS

We recognize that the climate crisis overlaps with other issues -- immigrant rights, housing justice, women's rights, racial justice, indigenous rights, are some examples.

**Affordable housing** is a growing problem in Seattle as we experience a burst in population growth and an influx of people with high paying jobs. Communities of color and communities with low-income levels, that have been in Seattle for many years, are being pushed out of the city. This trend is weakening our community ties and causing people to drive more.

Another example is **worker rights**. Workers in toxic waste environments are exposed to dangerous chemicals and suffer health risks. By creating better working conditions, we can also reduce the pollution that is harming our health and homes.

**Indigenous communities** have faced many environmental injustices. Their traditional lands and reservations are often leased (***without their permission***) to fossil fuel and toxic factories. This affects the livability, health, and sacred practices of many communities.



## THE NEW STORY

***So, now that we've defined climate justice, how do we communicate on this subject to different audiences? What is the story we need to tell?***

Together, rooted in our shared value for the planet and our communities, we can build a just society. Our connection to the planet and to each other makes us resilient and able to find solutions to tackle the climate problem. Working together, and centering the voices of those who have experienced the impacts of climate change, we can overcome this crisis.

Destructive industries sacrifice our communities and planet for short-term profit. While the climate crisis affects everyone and threatens our collective future, people of color and communities with low incomes are most vulnerable.

We must tackle the climate problem with solutions that also tackle social injustices and racism. By creating just solutions, we can build a world that is safe for everyone. We cannot depend on those who have created this problem to solve it. Working together, we can build resilient communities and a just society.

Those who experience the negative effects of climate change must be centered in our movement, because they already know the solutions to overcoming the crisis. If we are rooted in their experiences and our connection to the planet, we can overcome the forces that place short-term profit over our collective future.

“Those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change — particularly low-income communities and communities of color — must be at the heart of our efforts to build a resilient future in which ecosystems, human labor, and cultures are integrated into a thriving regenerative web of life.

—*Pathways to Resilience, 2015*

## THE MESSAGE TRIANGLE

*These are the top three messages of our story. They are the pieces that we must keep repeating in order to build up our message in the public's consciousness.*



**The Vision:**  
*Resilient Communities  
A Just Society*

Working together, we can build resilient communities and a just society. We must be rooted in our connection with the planet, and each other, so we can all thrive, without exploiting our planet and resources.



**The Solution:**  
*Fight Against Injustice  
Build A Just Transition*

We must tackle the climate problem by tackling injustice and racism. Working together, and centering the voices of those who have experienced the impacts of climate change, we can overcome this crisis.



**The Threat:**  
*Injustice  
Destruction Of Our Communities*

Destructive industries sacrifice our communities and planet for short-term profit. While this affects everyone, people of color and communities with low incomes are most vulnerable. They already face many injustices and don't have the resources to withstand the food shortages, displacement, floods or wildfires that result.

## KEY COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

**“If we are going to change the conversation, we need to unify our core communications strategies. Use the strategies below to ensure your communications are aligned with those underlying this narrative.”**

### 1. Make it about people, not data or policy.

We don't need to hear about melting ice-caps, or rising oceans levels, instead, let's make our message relevant to people's everyday lives by addressing health, safety, and jobs.

### 2. Use a social justice lens -- equity, not equality.

Climate justice is a social justice issue. Explore the concepts of privilege, power, oppression and opportunities to devise solutions by meeting people where they are.

### 3. Don't 'empower' communities; make space for their power by telling their stories.

The solutions to fight the climate crisis already exist within the communities that have been excluded, fighting injustices, and facing the issues directly. We need to create spaces for their stories and bring them into the narrative.

### 4. Connect the dots between issues.

Our movement is stronger when it is also fighting the issues that intersect with ours. With climate change, there are many intersecting issues that our stories must connect with. For example, climate change displaces people and so refugee and immigrant rights come into play. Another example is farmworker rights -- heat waves puts people at risk especially if they are already facing unfair wages and have no health benefits.

## MORAL OF THE STORY

*When time is limited, use these short slogans. The slogan of your campaign must be constructed to frame the moral of the story. What this message says matters above all else.*

*“When we fight injustice, we build a better future.”*

## MAIN FACTS

*Facts are important, however too many facts often result in a confused audience. Stick to one key fact that is the most persuasive and repeat it.*

- In order to avoid a catastrophic rise of 6% by the end of the century, global emissions need to have peaked by 2015 and reduce by at least 80% by 2050.<sup>1</sup>
- Just 23 rich countries, home to only 14% of the world’s population, have produced 60% of the world’s carbon emissions since 1850. Today they produce 40% of the world’s total. Despite committing to reduce annual emissions to below 1990 levels by 2012, their collective emissions are continuing to rise.<sup>2</sup>

### Environmental Racism Facts

- 16% - people of color employed in green fields, including foundations, nonprofits, and government agencies, also known as the Green Ceiling.<sup>3</sup>
- 68% - Black population that lives near a toxic or hazardous waste site, like coal plants.<sup>4</sup>

### Solutions

- Current wind, wave, solar and geothermal technologies could provide six times more power than the world currently uses.<sup>5</sup>

### Local

- In 2015, Washington State had 561,900 acres affected by wildfires, and this is expected to increase each year.<sup>6</sup>
- More than 100 years of industrial pollution has rendered the Duwamish River a Superfund Site, among the nation’s most contaminated areas. PCBs, mercury, arsenic, lead, and nearly 40 other pollutants exist at troublesome levels in the water, the sediment, and the seafood. The Duwamish people, are unable to fish, swim in their sacred river.<sup>7</sup>
- In April 2015, the Swinomish tribe sued Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway for violating legal agreements with the tribe. The Swinomish signed an easement with BNSF to allow 1 train of 25 cars across their territory in Skagit County, WA. BNSF has now been running 6 unit trains full of Bakken crude oil with more than a 100 cars, four times as much as allowed by the agreement.<sup>8</sup>

1. Worth, Jess. “Climate Justice - The Facts.” *New Internationalist All Posts RSS*.

2. World Resources Institute, ‘Climate Analysis Indicators Tool 5.0’, 2008, [www.cait.wri.org](http://www.cait.wri.org)

3. Green 2.0 the Challenge <http://www.diversegreen.org/the-challenge/>

4. *Air of Injustice: African Americans and Power Plant Pollution* - [Energyjustice.net](http://Energyjustice.net).

5. Greenpeace, ‘Energy [r]evolution: a sustainable global energy outlook’, 2008

6. *InciWeb the Incident Information System: Current Incidents*.

7. *Seattle Weekly*, Daniel Person, 10 Sept. 2013. Web.

8. *By State Supreme Court Order They Have Treaty Rights to. “Oil Check.”*

## PIVOTS – MESSAGING CHALLENGE POINTS

*We cannot defeat the other side’s message if we repeat it. It’s important to identify the core messaging challenges from the other side and craft pivots that quickly shift the communication back to our core message.*

WHAT THEY SAY	WHAT WE SAY
Initiative 732: Something is better than nothing!	Climate change is urgent - and we can’t afford to get it wrong. We cannot pass something that we know is flawed with the hope that we’ll fix it later. Solutions must center the people who have been historically impacted by our reliance on fossil fuels. I-732 doesn’t put a cap on the pollution and does nothing to help build the just society we envision and need.
Technology and clean energy will solve this crisis	Clean technology is important, but we know that technology alone can’t solve this crisis. We need to expand the focus to also building resilient, thriving communities and a future with things like healthy jobs and mass transit.
We can’t do without fossil fuels	To change the system we need to use the system. Working together, we can have the just transition and healthy future that we envision. A shift that ensures that workers and industries can adapt, so that our communities can thrive.
Climate change has nothing to do with race or class.	Climate change affects everyone, but it affects some people more than others. Data shows that people of color and communities with low incomes are most likely to live close to sources of pollution and experience more serious health impacts -- for example refineries and highways. Furthermore, communities that are vulnerable, due to existing inequality, don’t have the resources to face the brunt of climate change impacts.
Everyone deserves a better future and equal opportunities (equality)	To build a better world for all of us we must first ensure that people who have faced the most exclusion and injustices are allowed to rise to a commonly held standard. We must meet people where they are to build the just society we envision.

## NARRATIVE ELEMENTS:

### VALUES

*These are the values at the core of the narrative. The heroes stand up because they believe in these values. Values are not a story element, but are touchstones that must be woven into all the story elements.*

#### Justice and Equity:

- Never stop working to end racism and oppression.
- Everyone lives with dignity, a safe place to call home, clean air and water, and healthy food to eat.
- Everyone has access to resources and opportunities to prosper.

#### Respect for Life:

- We respect nature and its resources, vs. exploiting them for profit.
- We only take what we need and ensure a future where the next seven generations can meet their basic needs and thrive.

#### Self-Determination:

- Communities have control over things that affect their health, safety, and wellbeing.
- We are accountable to those most affected. Their voices are centered in our work.

## QUEST – THE BIG PICTURE VISION BEYOND THE POLICY

#### Resilient, thriving communities:

- We need strong social connections, less reliance on fossil fuels, access to safe jobs, and self-reliance, so that communities can weather any storm.
- Communities can ensure a safe future for the next generation, where air, water, and land are forever protected from the greedy hands of irresponsible corporations.

#### A Just Society:

- No one in our society is disposable for the sake of profit.
- Every person and community is valued.
- All of the planet's resources and ecosystems are protected.

**EVERYONE CAN PURSUE THEIR DREAMS, AND NO ONE IS EXPLOITED OR OPPRESSED.**

## THREAT – WHAT IS STANDING IN OUR WAY

### Injustice: Some communities and the environment are less valuable than profit.

- Environmental racism affects people of color, indigenous people, and communities with low income by polluting the rivers, air, and land where our communities live.
- Communities who are already vulnerable due to economic injustices bear the brunt of climate disasters and do not have the resources to face them.

***In Washington State, the Shell and Tesoro oil refineries in Anacortes are located on the Swinomish Tribe's territory, exposing them to the toxic fumes emitted into the air and released into the water.***

***The Boeing Factory is one of the main polluters in our region. The Duwamish river, which is a superfund site, is sacred to the Duwamish people of Seattle and is extremely polluted. So much so, that families cannot fish, swim, or drink its water.***

### Destruction of our one and only planet:

- Extractive corporations and destructive industries sacrifice our planet for short-term profits.
- Polluting industries destroy our air, land, and water.
- Fossil fuel extraction causes disasters like oil spills that pollute land and water, and oil train explosions that destroy our communities.
- With rising temperatures, large areas of land are becoming infertile, straining on our food chain.

***In Eastern Washington, industrial agriculture causes many environmental and health impacts to the community, which is largely people of color, including air pollution.***

## HEROES – ARCHETYPES

### Those who speak out against climate injustice:

- Elders and social workers who have been fighting injustice for many years.
- Parents and teachers working to educate communities.
- Policymakers and elected officials who are working towards a safe planet and just society
- Activists who tirelessly speak out against unjust laws and greedy corporations
- Elected officials who are centering the voices of the most impacted communities in their decision-making.

### Innovators practicing the solutions:

- Community members and organizations that work to find collective solutions.
- Responsible farmers and other workers who respect and protect the environment.
- Small business owners who practice sustainability and pay fair wages.
- People who use the planet's resources in a way that doesn't destroy our future.
- **Example:** Cooperation Jackson is a network of worker-owned cooperatives that are creating self-determination and economic democracy for African communities. They are building community-owned land trusts, urban farms, eco-villages and more.

### Build Strong and Resilient Local Communities:

- Prepare to weather the impacts of climate change by building strong relationships – bonds that will make our communities stronger.
- Development of a mass transit system should ensure that communities with low income and wealth do not get pushed out of the urban areas in the suburbs by gentrification. Displacement weakens our communities and people have to drive longer distances.
- Planning for affordable houses close to transit development is essential.

### Sustainable Businesses and a Just Transition:

- Use business models and lifestyles that respect and protect our planet's resources.
- Treat all workers with respect and pay good wages.
- Support local farmers and closed-loop producers.
- Hire green jobs (*those that are good for the environment and communities*) using inclusive hiring and retention policies.
- Creating a strategy to allow workers from fossil fuel and extractive industry to shift to new livelihoods without affecting their standard of living: trainings and financial aid.

### Worker-Owned Cooperatives:

- Take power away from greedy corporations. Worker owned cooperatives are fair and responsible to each other and the planet.

### Direct Action and Education:

- Engage in civil disobedience, when necessary.
- Create campaigns that increase awareness about the root causes of climate change
- Organize people from various avenues of life to come together to share knowledge and work together to create solutions.

### Carbon Reduction Policies and Strategies:

- Divest from destructive industries that profit from fossil fuels and invest in community-based, sustainable energy solutions.
- Invest in community control of land and protection of water resources.

## VILLAINS – ARCHETYPES OF WHO OR WHAT IS ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE THREAT

### Extractive/destructive industries

They destroy natural resources, displace indigenous peoples, and poison our environment.

- Industrial agriculture (*examples: Sakuma Brothers*)
- Fossil Fuel Industry (*examples: Shell, Tesoro*)

### Big Money

They influence public opinion, manipulate the rules to favor their own interests, and rig the economy to create inequality.

- Polluters (example: Boeing)
- Irresponsible corporate CEOs (examples: Exxon, Nestle)
- Climate deniers and lobbyists

## VILLAINS' WEAPONS – WHAT THE VILLAIN IS DOING

### They maintain inequalities

**Free Trade Agreements:** Under the guise of free trade and globalization, destructive corporations have plundered the planet's resources, destroyed and displaced indigenous communities, and exploited workers. These agreements also allow these industries to pollute without regulation. The TPP and TPIP are examples of trade agreements being negotiated that give multinational corporations power over local governments.

**False Promises:** Corporations and fossil fuel funded organizations present policies and solutions that continue the status quo of pollution, inequality, and deregulation.

*Use hate-fear-and racial prejudice to pit us against each other.*

**Manipulation:** The fossil fuel industry spends billions of dollars lobbying congress to control deregulation, subsidies, and international trade agreements that allow greedy corporations to continue business as usual. All the while, they spread false information on the true harms of their industry.

*They poison our air and drinking water with dangerous chemicals*

**Oil Trains:** Trains carrying highly explosive Bakken crude oil are transported from Montana and South Dakota through our region to various oil refineries. These oil trains have frequently derailed and exploded in the last 2 years causing devastating pollution and taking lives.

*Oil trains explosions and derailments are devastating, and our communities pay the price. These oil trains run through our communities in the Pacific Northwest.*

*Initiative 732 was proposed by a group that did not take into consideration the concerns and input brought by people of color and people who earn low incomes. The outcome is not helpful to those most in need and instead provides tax breaks to polluters.*

DON'T SAY	DO SAY
Consulting with communities of color	Include/work with the communities of color
Tribes	Indigenous people. Tribes should only be used when referring to individual or multiple governmental bodies of indigenous people.
Low-income people	People with lower incomes and wealth.
Vulnerable communities	Communities facing systemic racism or highly impacted communities.
Vulnerable, minority, at risk, marginalized, disadvantaged, underprivileged	Systematically left out, under-invested in, discriminated against, oppressed, disenfranchised, highly impacted, most impacted
Serving communities, “paternalistic”, empower	Remove barriers, invest in communities, communities are building their own power.
Hispanic	Latinx, Latino/a
Asian	Asian Pacific Islander (API)
Indians/Pakistani	South Asians
These communities/those communities	Our communities ( <i>context sensitive</i> )