

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

THE SIERRA CLUB'S BEN JEALOUS: PARABLES OF HEALING FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

LAURA FLANDERS: The science is clear. As the IPCC, a UN agency with climatologists from over 70 countries reported again this year, the Earth's temperature is rising, and with each increased increment change is speeding up. Climate change is already affecting humans, animals, birds, insects, and plants. As the directors of Greenpeace told this program last year, we simply cannot afford any new fossil fuel development, period. And yet, while the Biden administration claims to be dedicated to being a global leader in climate action, it is simultaneously greatly increasing oil and gas exports across the planet, and in just the past few weeks the administration has allowed the controversial Willow oil drilling project in Alaska to go forward, and given the green light to the auctioning of an area roughly the size of Arizona in the Gulf of Mexico to offshore oil and gas drilling. It is one heck of a time to be taking over the leadership of one of the oldest and biggest environmental organizations in this country. But that's just what our guest today is doing, he comes to the Sierra Club, not only as it's facing all that I've just mentioned, but it's also reckoning with the racism of its founder back in 1892, and its own history of, let's just say, not to put too fine a point on whiteness. Ben Jealous was the national president of the NAACP from 2008 to 2013, its youngest leader. During that time, he brought Republicans and Democrats together to do things like shrink prison populations and worked for a criminal justice reform. He ran for governor of Maryland in 2018, the first African American to do that, and he is just out with a book that is packed with stories about unlikely alliances and surprising histories, his own and the country's. The book's title is, "Never Forget Our People Were Always Free," The man is Ben Jealous, and I am very glad to welcome him to the "Laura Flanders Show" as my guest. Hi, Ben, how are you?

BEN JEALOUS: It's always good to be with you, Laura, thank you for having me.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, a lesser person might feel somewhat daunted to be taking over a major environmental organization at this moment, how are you feeling?

BEN JEALOUS: I'm feeling good, I'm excited. This organization, the Sierra Club, one of the two main organizations of my childhood, the NAACP being the other, is everywhere, and that means that we're always in the right place at the right time to do the right thing, it's exciting to be taking over the leadership of an activist army that's so huge.

LAURA FLANDERS: We often start these conversations by asking our guests, I ask people, you know, what is forefront of your mind and in your heart as we start this conversation. So, what's that for you today, right now, as we sit here?

BEN JEALOUS: We are at a moment, call it our anti-NAFTA moment, when we can actually envision because we have the technology, we have the demand, we have the money to build an economy that brings back manufacturing, that creates millions of jobs here, that delivers vehicles at a lower and lower cost as demand meets supply, that cost a fraction of what the gas automobile in most folks driveway costs to power and maintain. And that greener future is frankly the economy that lifts all boats again, that a lot of us have been fighting for a long time. Now, the obstruction, what gets in the way, is every corporation that's invested in this status quo that's kept so many, not just people of color, so many white folks trapped in poverty or just a downward economic spiral for decades, that's the oil and gas industry, it's oftentimes your local power company. But that's what has me excited right now, is that doing the right thing by our environment is also doing the right thing by our nation, it's also doing the right thing by our families when it comes to building an economy that can truly lift all boats.

LAURA FLANDERS: You and I have been speaking about this opportunity for a long time, and there's a man in the White House who had claims to understand that, and put a bunch of money behind that in the so-called Inflation Reduction Act. And yet the news this time as we're speaking has not been good over the last few weeks, the Willow Project in Alaska, this new auction in the Gulf of Mexico, how do you make sense of it? And is this just more evidence of we have yet to outfox the corporate power?

BEN JEALOUS: You know, the corporate talking points are quite seductive, they're also not true. This is not about energy independence, energy independence is solar, energy independence is meeting the needs of the people in this country, and quite frankly, this is about exports, you know, this is about profiteering, this is about greed. And greed frankly of corporations that are addicted to destroying our planet. That's what this is about, I think unfortunately when President Biden makes bad decisions, it's because they're often rooted in an outmoded way of thinking, both about the climate and about politics. When he is right, he's right, when he is forward thinking, he's on the cutting edge as he has been with the Inflation Reduction Act and the IIJA. But when he is wrong, it feels like he's trying to kind of rerun a game from the 1980s, that the science doesn't back anymore, and frankly the politics don't either.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, on the political fronts I think his defenders would say he's having to deal with a Joe Manchin in his administration, who pushed this auction at least through in that Inflation Reduction Act. And that takes me, neatly, to your history and your book, and the sort of challenge that you're taking on right now to create some new alliances, including ones that you've been trying to make for years over your career, alliances with working class whites, like those who vote for Manchin. Could they vote for somebody better? Probably, but how do we reach them?

BEN JEALOUS: My family moved to Northern California a few years before I was born in 1973, and what got them headed west was that my parents' marriage had been against the law in Maryland in 1966, dad's white, mom's Black, and back then, not only could you not get married across racial lines in Maryland, you weren't allowed to move into or return to the state if you had married across racial lines, cohabitating across racial lines as man and wife was barred explicitly by state law. And so I grew up in this world, kind of on this bridge between east and west, north and south, Black and white. And the two organizations that really my childhood were the Sierra Club, principally in Northern California, and then the NAACP principally in the summers I spent in West Baltimore. And so for me at 50, this was really coming full circle, but frankly coming full circle at a particular time for our planet, for our people, for our nation. Again, we are at a moment when we can build a bigger, better more prosperous future for all of our families, it requires us to have courage and shifting from a dependence on oil and gas towards electrifying everything. And what that means is that places like Baltimore, we can reopen steel plants and frankly reopen steel plants that are much cleaner than the ones that we shut down decades ago. And it means lots of jobs for people who don't have college degrees. And so for me at this moment, coming to the Sierra Club is really not just coming full circle in my own life, but the two great passions of my life, civil rights and the environment, frankly justice for working people and the environment all coming together. Laura, the last time I was out on the stump for an environmentalist organization, I was 20 years old, and I was the student Environmental Action Coalition's national speaker against NAFTA, touring the country. Back then we sounded like Chicken Little, the hard part is that we were right.

LAURA FLANDERS: And racial justice? Are there things that you have in your sights, ways that the Sierra, you are hoping the Sierra Club will change in order to be able to deliver that more effectively?

BEN JEALOUS: In my book, "Never Forget Our People Were Always Free," one of the things that I talk about is that Dr. King, when he was assassinated 55 years ago, April 4th, 55 years ago, his final lesson he was trying to teach us was that in addition to being the boot on people of color's neck, racism is also the old wedge from an old colonial system of divide and conquer. And that everybody who gets divided by that wedge is hurt, because their political power is diminished. And so in the environmentalist movement we have to recognize that Black people and Brown people have always been the ones most likely to support environmental protections, and yet oddly excluded from the leadership of the green movement, and unfortunately not always feeling invited into green organizations. The nice thing about the Sierra Club is that it's done that work, and that from day one when I showed up, what I found was the most integrated inclusive green, you know, national green group in the entire country. I've toured more than a quarter of the chapters, and you see it on the ground, you know, Black women leading chapters in places like Ohio, Washington State, and Alabama, you know, Latino men leading in the Southwest, and other places across the country. This organization has done hard work, it's profited from it by

building a stronger mass movement organization, and I'm excited to expand that. And what's also clear quite frankly is that we also benefit from having older white men who are center, you know, centrist or even center-right. Because again, we got to get big ideas through a US Senate that requires a super majority, and so we have assignments for the whole rainbow of supporters that we have and people from the left of the left, again to people who are right of center, what we really care is that you agree about protecting our wild places, and ensuring that climate change stops.

LAURA FLANDERS: Have any of those people come around? I know there were a few that got frustrated in the discussion around the history of the founding of Sierra Club and said, "we're sacrificing our focus on nature for political correctness."

BEN JEALOUS: As I pulled people together in person traveling across the country, I'd say everybody's ready to move forward. And honestly, as a former NAACP president who in researching his book had to wrestle with the fact that Robert E. Lee is my cousin, the reality is that, you know, we're all kind of more connected to these 19th century white guys than we'd like to admit. And in the panoply of American leaders in the 19th century, John Muir was among the best. Yeah, he talked like a 19th century white guy, that's clear, he was also, when he was writing his "Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf" for instance, he was carrying the papers, the anti-slavery papers of Thoreau in his pocket, he was wrestling with and would ultimately evolve himself. He started off saying some things about Black folks and Native Americans that weren't so good. He ended up towards the end of his life in a much better place. And so, you know, we are evolving, John Muir evolved. We all have to reckon with, quite frankly not nice things said in the 19th century, and frankly when we do, we all evolve that much faster.

LAURA FLANDERS: You dig up some extraordinary history. One story I didn't know at all, which was the story of one of your ancestors, Edward David Bland.

BEN JEALOUS: He had been born a slave in his uncle's house, his white uncle's house. We figured all of that, that's in the book too. And then when he left at 17, by the time he was twice that age he was a major political leader in Virginia. And he would ultimately, after the end of Reconstruction, when the Black community was most vulnerable, had been fighting the Klan for half a decade, and the public schools that they had created, that Black leaders had created during reconstruction got the state to fund public schools for everyone, were under threat from the old plantation oligarchs who were ascendant, now that Reconstruction was over. He found his natural ally in saving those schools in a former Confederate general named William B. Mahone, who was ultimately written out of the histories of the Confederacy for being a race traitor, because he would join up with my grandmother's grandfather, and together they would build a multiracial populist party, third party, that took over the Virginia government. That narrative I

think would've led to a very different politic in our country over the last a hundred and, you know, 20 years or so. And that's the politic that I'm interested in building.

LAURA FLANDERS: I have to reflect on the attention that has gone to that horrendous disaster in East Palestine, Ohio, because I've heard from people in Black communities that are buried in toxins on a regular basis, that they feel sympathy for the victims of course, but a kind of frustration with the imbalance in the attention, with the head of the company coming down say, "we'll make it good," The Secretary of Transportation saying, "this is top priority," obviously you sympathize, what do you do?

BEN JEALOUS: Oh, I think that you use this as precedent for everything going forward, and you use the moment to leverage as much relief as you can for the communities that have been impacted by Norfolk Southern, and by chemical trains period in the south. In Mobile, Alabama, Africatown is a part of Mobile that has been just destroyed by the oil and gas industry. Everything from refineries, and you know, looking more broadly at petrochemicals, biochemical, you know, biochemical trained derailment too. And I was down there recently, and I know it stings a little bit for folks to see so much attention and the same breath folks will tell you that it also gives them hope, because this is an important precedent for how we deal with this. And quite frankly, how the folks in Africatown were treated was based on precedence before that. And so I'm optimistic that no chemical train derailment will ever be treated the same as it was, because of East Palestine.

LAURA FLANDERS: You have talked in this conversation already about the personal connection and your own personal history, and I think about how personally we need to take the emergency that we're in climate-wise. It sometimes feels sort of outside of ourselves, but one of the projects of the Sierra Club, one of them has been to reconnect people with nature and wilderness, and a sense of what it's like to be in that environment. And at the same time you have push from environmental justice leaders who say, "you know, the environment isn't someplace else, it's also right here."

BEN JEALOUS: One of the interesting things of the Sierra Club is we used to only do outings, into like the wild outdoors, and now we do Toxic Tours in many cities, and we're, you know, really helping to build a broader consensus. One of the things that we have to do as a movement is to, yes, talk about the local epicenter where there are cancer clusters, and then quickly generalize to the way that big oil and big gas drive cancer in places like Houston, far beyond that epicenter, it's just in the air, you know. We visited a soccer field, it's known to be a cancer cluster for children, and yet kids teams play in that soccer field every weekend. And so as an environmentalist group that is known for getting people into the wild, our membership is hugely concentrated in the cities across this country, and when you look at the work that we do, it mirrors that. And I, what I'm, one of the things I'm most proud of is that over the last decade the

Sierra Club has become increasingly a trusted ally of environmental justice communities across the country, and that gives me hope. As I toured the 16 chapters, the first quarter of the Sierra Club chapters that I first, you know, engaged before taking over, every single one of them was working on the ground with local environmental justice communities, and with climate justice committees of the NAACP, and that gives me great hope, that increasingly we aren't separate communities as much as we are groups of activists who may have a different principle focus, but at the end of the day are all willing to throw down for each other to make sure that each of our communities gets the justice it deserves, and we all come together to save the planet that we all live on, for even people far from here who are impacted by the massive amount of pollution coming out of our country.

LAURA FLANDERS: How would you describe how things have changed as we mark another Earth Day?

BEN JEALOUS: You know, I, what I would say is this, protecting the environment through our young people is returning to be a bipartisan issue. If you look beyond the real backwards leaders who define the Republican moment, who are virtually all kind of old men with gray hair, and you go listen to the young people who identify as Republicans, they know what's what. There's also a lot of folks who used to be called Republicans who now feel a bit lost because they're not down with Donald Trump and his crazy opportunistic racist type of politics, who also recognize the science. And so what I've said to folks in the Sierra Club is we've got to be bigger than the Democratic party to our left and to our right. And that's what we figured out on criminal justice reform, was that we could reach out to the libertarians, and the fiscal conservative, and the, you know, and the Christian conservatives, and all of them agreed with us about the need to shrink prisons. And so yeah, I'm on the hunt now for the Republicans who agree with us on the need to actually drive down emissions and switch to a better future, and those are all conversations that are already happening inside the Sierra Club, and that we're preparing to have even more robust conversation about in earnest, because we're the ones who have been fighting to deliver this green future for decades, really, for more than a century. And now there's a responsibility to help ensure that the nation gets it right.

LAURA FLANDERS: Ben, to close, I always ask my guests, you know, what do they think is the story the future will tell of now? And you are an optimistic person, and you've indicated the way that you think we may revert back to something better in the future, that reflects maybe more of how we started. But I'm curious about time, because, boy, the clock is ticking if you listen to the IPCC or if you listen to frontline people across this planet. So I'm not gonna ask you about a hundred years from now, I feel like I need to know what you think the story will be that the future tells 10 years from now.

BEN JEALOUS: You know, this is the moment when we must all become optimists. There were times that maybe we had the privilege of time to argue a lot about, you know, the small bits of who makes you the rightest, you know, the most correct. It's my grandmother said to me a long time ago, "it's true, pessimists are right more often, but optimist win more often, and you've got to decide in this life what's more important to you." And the reality is that if we're gonna build an environmental movement that is big enough to actually win the day, we've got to show up to the American people with a vision that says, we can build a better economy that lifts all boats, we have the technology, we have the resources, we have the demand, we have the will. What's also important to point out, we will rebuild American manufacturing, we will bring back millions of jobs, your family will profit more Well, yes, this is about stopping climate change, it's also about creating a better future for all of us, and you and I both know that most voters, they just don't have the luxury to worry about things 10 years in the future, they want to know how they're gonna put more food on the table next month. And honestly, our movement offers solutions to both.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right, I think the Sierra Club made the right decision in bringing you on board to head the organization up. Thank you, thank you, thank you, it has been a pleasure to talk with you, Ben, and thank you for your book, which is really a wonderful document.

BEN JEALOUS: Thank you, Laura. It's always good to be with you.

LAURA FLANDERS: Environmental policy is infamously hard to set, tree huggers versus tree cutters, laws have often driven people apart. One sad example is the Roadless Rule in this country's invaluable Tongass Forest. In Southeast Alaska, that law has ping ponged in and out of effect depending which party was in the White House, resulting in a boom and bust economy that hasn't helped the people there or the forest. The Biden administration is taking a different approach, not only banning industrial scale, old growth logging, but also investing in something they're calling the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy, which is pumping \$25 million into a diverse array of local groups, village and regional governments, economic development corporations and environmentalists along with local Native nations. They're being resourced to determine what they think are the best strategies for transitioning to a healthy future for themselves, the region, and that forest. "You can live in a place without destroying it," the Haida say, the wilderness was never untouched as men like John Muir thought, it was tended and we can tend it again in a diverse way, mimicking in fact the kind of biodiversity you see in the forest itself. Does the SASS stand a chance of setting a standard for the nation? Yes, it also has the best ever acronym, so let's hear it, for more SASS and less division for the environment. Thanks for joining me, I'm Laura for "The Laura Flanders Show," until the next time, stay kind, stay curious, and subscribe to our podcast if you want the full uncut version of this conversation every week. All the information is at our website, thanks for joining me.

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