Benji Backer: Nature is Nonpartisan

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Ariana Brocious: I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: And this is Climate One.

Kousha Navidar: Today it can feel like everything - like literally everything - gets pulled into politics.

Ariana Brocious: We are living in an extremely polarized country, and moment.

Kousha Navidar: I mean, even something as fundamental as the air we breathe or the land we live on is fought over. And of course there are so many reasons for that: financial motivation, mis and disinformation and - I know I'm going to sound like an old man - social media too.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, and that's especially true when it comes to climate. For a lot of people, the climate is a politically charged partisan issue, wrapped up in the culture wars. And many people's feelings about it – about why it's happening, what we should do about it, and frankly, in some corners, whether it is happening at all – come down to which "side" you're on.

Kousha Navidar: But what if there's a way to get past the politically charged language and bring more people into the climate tent?

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. I mean, the climate crisis doesn't care about anyone's ideology or political identity. We are all experiencing it, not equally, but climate-induced disasters and weather whiplash are increasingly impacting everyone. So how do we get more people unified behind the idea that we need to address it?

Kousha Navidar: Benji Backer built his career bringing conservatives into the climate conversation. He founded the American Conservation Coalition, and that grew into the largest right of center environmental organization in the country. And they even had a presence at the Republican National Convention during the 2024 election. But now, he says that approach is falling short of bringing people together, and so he's trying something new.

Ariana Brocious: His new organization, Nature is Nonpartisan, is built on a simple idea: that caring about the natural world shouldn't belong to any one political identity.

Kousha Navidar: And Backer, who has long identified himself as a conservative, told me that lately, he doesn't feel he belongs in any political party.

Benji Backer: I would consider myself truly politically independent at this point in my life. I'm politically homeless for lack of a better term.

Ariana Brocious: You know, I bet there are a LOT of people who feel that way, especially right now. Of course, trying to take the politics out of something that's become so polarized is no small task.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, so what does it actually look like to build a nature forward organization that feels… dare I say…inviting? Or even fun? For Backer, it's about finding that common connection that most people have with nature, whether that's hunting, fishing, hiking… or just wanting clean air and water. He and I connected immediately over fishing.

Kousha Navidar: I thought you'd appreciate this. I went on my first fishing trip, pretty recently because I wanted to learn about everything that it took to eat fish, which I do a lot. So catching it, um, you know, killing it, dressing it, cooking it, eating it. And I come from a family that's pretty in tune with nature, but just going on that trip I think was really important for me. And I was wondering for you, what the last nature trip was that you went on?

Benji Backer: I actually proposed in Patagonia to my fiance, so that like, it's kinda like the biggest nature trip I've ever taken, probably.

Kousha Navidar: Wait, was it this trip where you proposed?

Benji Backer: Yeah, like two, three weeks ago.

Kousha Navidar: Congratulations, holy diver. That's amazing.

Benji Backer: Yeah. Thank you. Yeah, I mean, it's really on brand for both of us. 'cause we're both nature lovers and I, my dad proposed to my mom on the top of a mountain in France and I thought my whole life that is so sick, I'm not gonna be able to do that. Uh, I don't know why I thought that, 'cause I'm on top of mountains as much as I can be. But I decided to wait until we went to Patagonia, which was like my first vacation in a long time. And it was an awesome, awesome experience. So I, I don't know if I'll ever get a better nature experience than that, at least maybe some funnier stories or like crazier experiences, but I don't know if it's a better experience

Kousha Navidar: I don't know. I mean, talk about being in tune with nature and how it reflects with your life. Like that's, that's amazing. That's

Benji Backer: There were birds that sort over our head, like falcons and I mean, it was kind of like, and maybe they were trying to eat us, you know? But. Uh, it was romantic in the way that we at least felt it. It was, it was super cool and it was a beautiful day. It was, it was perfect.

Kousha Navidar: Why was it important for you to propose in nature?

Benji Backer: I mean, other than her, it's the most important part of my life. I mean, it's, uh, it's the place that I feel the happiest. It's the thing that reminds me about what I do. It's the thing that's inspired me to be who I am, and it's had the same effect on her. So it was something that. I just, I mean, we didn't obviously talk about it because you can't ruin the surprise, but I just knew that that would be the only place that made sense for her. And it also was the only place that made sense for me. it's the one place that I feel the most myself. I mean, this work can actually be really difficult and challenging and stressful, and the only way I ever really am able to keep going is by, you know, continuing to be out there. There's nothing more important to the world than nature. And same with nothing more important to me.

Kousha Navidar: I love that, and thank you for sharing that. I mean, I can feel it. And I imagine that connection has a lot to do with why you started your organization. So can you tell me just a little bit about Nature is Nonpartisan? How did it come to be?

Benji Backer: Yeah, I grew up in Wisconsin and our version of nature was the 12,000 lakes that the state has, and I grew up going up there with my grandpa and family and fishing and boating, and. We had a small cabin in the woods that was a family cabin that my grandparents had built in the 1960s. And I just fell in love with nature at a young age. It was something I look forward to every weekend. and I really started to, in high school, become active in politics and realized pretty much during that time that for some reason, the environment that I loved was caught up in political warfare. And when I was loving the forest and the trees and the lakes and the outdoors in Wisconsin and then was able to travel as well with my family to a couple of national parks, I was like, I don't know how this could be political in any way and how protected, because it's so obvious when you're in those spaces how much we rely on it to survive. So I think one of the problems that environmentalists have is that they tend to make the environment some like we just need to protect it for the sake of protecting it. When if you go back to like second grade science class, it's like we need to protect it because we actually rely on it to survive. And like, yes, there's a give and take because it provides the resources that we need to build homes and have energy and we need to take from nature for sure. But we also cannot take everything otherwise we cannot exist. And when you're in nature, you realize that, you realize that because of the sheer power and beauty and amazing just vibes that it gives you on a, on a day-to-day basis when you're out there and then when you go back to your normal life, you kind of forget how much it matters to your day-to-day life. But I couldn't fathom how the most important thing that keeps us going was somehow caught up in political warfare.

Kousha Navidar: So then how did that, yeah, how did that, how did that play into the,founding of the organization then? Because I, I mean, it's not the first organization you founded, right? Like you had the American Conservation Coalition, which you've now moved on from to start Nature is nonpartisan. Like what gap in the existing groups were you trying to address?

Benji Backer: Well, I would consider myself truly politically independent at this point in my life. I'm politically homeless, probably, for lack of a better word.

Kousha Navidar: politically homeless. Okay.

Benji Backer: Um, and I first started a CC because I wanted to get conservatives back to the table and the environment to make it bipartisan. But what I realized in doing that was that that also sort of made it partisan in a roundabout way, because it was only focusing on conservatives. And in today's politics, it's us versus them all the time. And so if you're just focused on conservatives, then you're just trying to get conservatives to win on that issue. And that's just not, that's, it's helpful in

getting us closer to the bipartisanship, but it, it doesn't really get us there. The real reason why I started Nature is Nonpartisan wasn't based off of that. It was based off of the fact that if you are. An American that cares about the environment, that wants to join a movement around the environment. I don't think that there is one right now that's culturally relevant, that's kind of fun to be a part of that makes you want to be a part of it. So I think that that's missing. And I also think there, there's a movement missing that actually represents. The wide swath of people who care. Like if you're a Prius driving hippie, there's a group for you. And if you're a gun toting hunter, there's a group for you. But the reality is those groups actually want the same things, and there's not really an organization or a movement that represents that either.

Kousha Navidar: Your cultural relevancy point is so interesting. How do you make an organization that's culturally relevant in your eyes? Like, what does that mean to you?

Benji Backer: When you think about the American fabric, the identity around America, you think about a lot of different things, and it might depend on who you are, but. There are certain things that make American's values obvious. So like freedom, uh, individual liberty, the ability to do what you want, limited government. Those are kind of things that America has embodied. I would love to make the environment something that is part of the American ethos because it's something that. We have been blessed with, I mean, this country is the most environmentally diverse country. You have the deserts of the southwest, you get the rainforest in the northwest, you've got the plains and you've got the east coast's amazing diversity from, from north to south, and it's really not part of the American ethos right now. You don't really think about it when you walk around. As an American, uh, in, in a way that actually did use to exist. So in the 1970s and eighties, Americans did sort of wear the environment on their sleeves. It was something that people showed up for all the time. And it was in movies, It was part of your community. The first Earth Days were almost nationally celebrated events. And Americans advocated for the environment together in a way that was very cultural. And uh, it's also how we got, you know, the Lorax and all these kind of cultural movies and iconic things that came out. And right now that's not happening, at least in a way that's not polarized. So we're trying to do that in the 21st century way, which looks a lot different. But to me, that's going where people are. It's YouTube, it's social media. It's doing it in a digital way, but then also connecting people to in-person communities where they can go and volunteer and be a part of a conservation movement. It's having some of the biggest voices who maybe aren't seen as environmental figures become part of the conversation and have them be leaders in this space. So it's really doing it in a way that's less policy centric and more like community, human, uh, pop culture centric. And you're gonna be seeing a lot more of kind of how we're gonna do that in the years to come. But that's sort of the broad strokes of how I think we can shift towards getting the answers we need, because today, politics more than ever is downstream of culture, and if culture's not talking about the environment, we don't get the environmental action that we need.

Kousha Navidar: That point, that last one about it being downstream, I think is especially relevant because as I'm listening to you, I, I, I can kind of feel myself nodding along. It, the fact that it's polarizing. It is a, a point of political leverage now based on what side of the aisle you kind of find yourself on. I think the point about the Lorax is also quite interesting. I mean, the speaker for the trees is this cultural touchstone that I know at least, I don't know if like younger folks still relate to it as much, but it, it was like a very, that, that Dr. Seuss character. Is very apparent. I don't know. I mean maybe Captain Planet in the nineties is the next one. I can't think of like a cartoon character

Benji Backer: right.

Kousha Navidar: climate space.

Benji Backer: And, and really, I mean, if you think of, if you ask people what they think of in the

last 30 years when it comes to the environment, they would name off individuals who are polarizing. They would name off Al Gore. Greta Thunberg, AOC. And I'm not saying that those people don't have a lot of validity in what they say a lot of the time, but it's, those are individual people who are politically adjacent, who are very polarizing. And when you think about the environment in the latter half of the 20th century, it's Smoky the bear, it's the Lorax, it's Americans studying together. It's actually something that's fairly positive. It's rivers that were on fire that are now not on fire in Ohio. And so that's the sort of change that we need to get back to.

Kousha Navidar: I also want to talk about in, in the policy sphere, you and your organization help shape the executive order, creating the Make America Beautiful again, conservation Commission. Can you tell me about that a little bit and how it came to be?

Benji Backer: Well, something that people will learn about me over time, hopefully, is that I really don't ever write anybody off, ever. And if you look up my background, I have a history of not being a big Donald Trump fan. So I just want to get that out there. But that doesn't mean that I would never stop trying to work with somebody who I disagree with, and no matter how much I dislike them, and in good faith, like I'm not gonna go in there to try to sabotage them. Like if you change your mind and you wanna work on my team, or at least be on my team for this one issue, I'm all in to work with you. So when President Trump won in 2024. I was already getting this organization going. And I wanted to make a cultural movement organization, but I also wanted it to work from a policy standpoint to show that it can be nonpartisan, that literally anyone can show up to the table. And I thought, what better way to show that than to have one of the most anti-environment, at least in perception, politicians work across the aisle to get something good done for the environment. And who else is gonna be trying this? 'cause no one really in the environmental community would even think it's possible. So we very early on decided that it'd be a perfect showcase of what could happen. And while there hasn't been a lot of follow through on the commission and, and the actions, although there's three years left, so maybe they'll change their course on that. I think it just showed the power of showing up in a nonpartisan way because we actually help write and craft the executive order, which for those who don't know, which is pretty much everybody, uh, the commission is tasked to solve problems related to National Park funding, uh, access issues for people, uh, when they're recreating to help fight forest fires, some, you know, more conservation related issues. And the thing is, when we went into the White House to talk about that, we went in in partnership with groups from across the spectrum. So it wasn't just us, it was some groups on the left and some groups on the right. And if you asked us how we got it done, it was a, that we tried and we were persistent about it and we weren't gonna just say, okay, this guy is not good for the environment and so we're not gonna try. So that was number one. But number two was we worked with people across the spectrum to show the president's team that this is not, this is like an 80 20 issue, if not a 90 10 issue. People want you to do this. And we showed up in that force and it got done so. Has he been the most pro-environmental president ever? Obviously, no. Uh, that would be a complete lie to like, try to greenwash that. However, it is true that when you show up in a nonpartisan way, you get a lot more done.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. But then simultaneously, like there are realities that. If you are in the policy world, make it very difficult when you're trying to find compromise or like live with something that maybe don't feel right about in the first place. I mean, on the Department of Interior's website, the first priority of.The Make America Beautiful again. Conservation Commission is to quote, “balance stewardship and economic growth. Environmental protection and the responsible development of natural resources are not mutually exclusive. America's golden Age is about energy dominance and conservation abundance,” And I'm sure that there are people that would read that statement and think, okay, it's a cynical ploy. Open up public lands, more fossil fuel development. How do you navigate that when you're in the room and you're trying to make things meet together to push things

forward.

Benji Backer: It's really hard, but I think that those are the hardest conversations that Americans aren't willing to have right now. When you look back at. History, like that's how politics used to work, is as actually trying to find that compromise, which is really uncomfortable almost all the time. And what, what you just read off I, I actually don't think is very problematic. Like we have to build homes and we have to, you know, mine from minerals that are in our phones and we have to mine from minerals that are in solar panels, like we have to balance economic stewardship and environmental protection. But if that is just code words for opening up public lands, then that isn't okay. So compromising on the approach and compromising on the details are different things. If you're, if you're saying, Hey, we do need to balance these things, totally fair. But if, if, if balance is in the name of actually just greenwashing or overshadowing what's actually happening, then that's a different problem.

Kousha Navidar: I mean, I guess to your point, it's about the good faith argument, right? Like Hmm. And I mean to interrupt you, sorry. Go on.

Benji Backer: no, no. I mean, if, yeah, if you're showing up because you actually want to strike that balance, then that's actually the right way to do it. In my opinion, it's way better than it being militant and saying we can't develop resources anywhere or we have to develop resources everywhere. but you actually have to follow through on that balance. And if someone doesn't follow through on the balance, then they rely. And so I think that that's, the compromise has to come, but it can't come at the expense of, of people just lying about it just to get people on board.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. Do you feel like it's harder to operate in good faith now or the same or easier?

Benji Backer: I mean, it's brutal. DC is the worst place on earth. I mean, it's, and I, and I mean that like, I'm not even making an analogy. I think it actually might be the worst place on earth because it's the most egocentric, power driven center of the universe that I've ever seen, and, and there's so much manipulation going on. And the manipulation is at the expense of all of us, and people believe it. And people are gonna think that's me coding just an attack on Trump. It's not, it's an attack on the whole political system in general. People don't realize how bad it is, and it's not quite House of Cards bad people aren't necessarily being shoved in front of trains, but it, it's like, it's like it's close. It's close to that. And so it's harder than ever and I've been doing political stuff since I was 10 and I'm 28 now. It's 18 years. It's by far the worst I've ever seen. And people don't want good faith people. To work with them. in DC you're incentivized by working with bad faith actors. It's all transactional. It's all, what do I get in this? What do you get in that? How do I rise up in the ranks and. It's why we have to build the cultural movement We have to create a world where politicians can't afford to not strike the balance that we're talking about. We have to show them that that's actually what people want, and you can show them polling that shows that, but like the force of the actual people is not backing that up. And until we change that, it's gonna be hard to get these bad forces to actually pay attention. And also just to, I mean, my other passion is trying to figure out how we change the political system in general. I'm hoping that this is a first mover issue in that, but right now DC is beyond broken and it's harder than it's ever been. And it's, it's honestly dismaying, but it also makes the work so much more important.

Ariana Brocious: We'll continue our conversation with Benji Backer after a quick break. Coming up, what does it take to bring everyone into the idea of conservation?

Benji Backer: We have to meet them where they're at, what they care about, You know, if you care about hunting or you care about fishing or you care about hiking or you care about the forest, that's

your why, your WHY, that's what we need to tap into.

Ariana Brocious: That’s up next, when Climate One continues.

Ariana Brocious: Help others find our show by leaving us a review or rating. Thanks for your support!

Kousha Navidar: This is Climate One. I’m Kousha Navidar. Today we’re talking with an avid outdoorsman who’s been trying to broaden the political consensus around conservation. Benji Backer is the founder of Nature is Nonpartisan.

On the organization's website, there’s a feature that really caught my attention. Each staff member has their political affiliation listed and then crossed out. So for example one person is listed as a “progressive” but that is crossed out and replaced with “surfer.” or “conservative” with “hiker.” So I asked Benji Backer about that choice.

Benji Backer: I think it's leaning into how crappy the polarization is to then undo it, right? Like some things are bigger than the polarization that we're seeing. Decency, humanity, love of the environment. These things do transcend party lines for most people or ideological lines. And although the media and social media really tries hard to convince us otherwise. I posted a video a few weeks ago about after Renee Goode died, the protestor that liberals were convinced after that that Republicans just wanted them dead.

Kousha Navidar: Hmm.

Benji Backer: When Charlie Kirk died Republicans were convinced that liberals just wanted them dead because that's what the social media algorithms that they follow are, are saying. And I kind of follow everybody, so I saw both, like when Charlie Kirk died, all the people on my conservative feed were saying, see, the liberals just want us dead. And I'm like thinking to myself, I, I'm surrounded by liberals all the time, and none of them would've ever wanted that to happen or. The same thing with the Renee Good thing, like I know a ton of conservatives were like, dang, that sucks that she died. And it's like this. That's not okay. So I, I think it just speaks to why, unfortunately, that's a really dark example of why we would do something like that and that we're gonna keep leaning into the polarization to nonpolar it. Like there are some things that rise above partisan politics and ideology. The environment has to be one of those things because it is bigger than that at the end of. At the end of our lives, no one will remember what political beliefs we had. But if we don't have a planet for the next generation, they'll remember that. And the planet will remember that like no one cares about who wins elections. 50 years from now, other than the planet, like that's what we leave behind. And the earth should be there when we're, when we're dead and God, and it should be there long after. And whatever political identity we wore on our sleeves, so much less important than that. Same with being good person, same with being good family members. Same with treating people well, same with showing up for people, right? and. I, I think that we've lost the plot on that. We've lost the plot that above these stupid political bickering things that we are humans. And it's not just cliche to say that it's, it's true and we're being pitted against each other in a way that's not helpful. So I think leaning into that to help people realize that, oh, wait, a conservative and a liberal can actually see the same way is, is an important thing.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, and I think your point about the feeds that we see is so relevant because we become isolated and I think especially just get fed things to enforce certain points of view. But then you say like, we lost the plot. Okay, how do you reintroduce the plot? Because the reality of that is

that Republicans have historically been skeptical of climate policy and yet. If I'm understanding it right, polling for younger conservatives seems to show that they care more about the issue. So is that a shift that we're seeing inside the party, or is that just like still mostly rhetorical. What, what have, what have you seen?

Benji Backer: It is a shift, but I think what we need to realize is that it's not even right versus left. In this case, it's right versus wrong, and like we just need to focus on bringing people into the movement who see the right versus wrong argument. Like we have, we have to lower emissions. We have to protect the environment. We have to be able to leave the world better than we found it. And and that's not a partisan belief. And so yeah, there's gonna be some conservatives who are against that, and some conservatives who are for that. And we just need to build a winning coalition of people. one of the ways we're gonna show that is we're launching a YouTube show that's gonna have two unlikely people sit down together over a campfire to talk about the environment. And the host is a comedian. Uh, and so it's gonna be lighthearted and and fun, but like we had a drag queen and a conservative influencer. We had a Mormon leader and a tribal leader. We had really unlikely people, a Democrat member of Congress who also served in the Biden administration with a rancher and. We're just trying to show upfront that these things, these like boxes that we put ourselves in are not necessarily accurate. That the media exacerbates actually how real that difference is and that yes, there are more young conservatives that believe in climate change than people would think, but it's so much more than that. It's about like, are you on the same side as each other on the end goal of leaving this planet better than you found it.

Kousha Navidar: Have you filmed any of those episodes yet?

Benji Backer: Yeah. We filmed all, all six of the first episodes.

Kousha Navidar: How have you watched the footage back yourself?

Benji Backer: Yeah. It's incredible. I mean,

Kousha Navidar: me about it? Like what, yeah, what's

Benji Backer: I mean,

Kousha Navidar: about it?

Benji Backer: so. I am not gonna get too detailed on this, but one of the guests got there and learned that they were being paired with another guest and they hadn't read the email correctly. 'cause everyone flew in for this, by the way. So they, they landed in Utah and they learned that they were being paired with one of the guests and they threatened to, to fly home

Kousha Navidar: Oh wow.

Benji Backer: because they were so upset about who they were being paired with, even though we'd already told them. Then they ended up having breakfast together and now and before they were supposed to go on and she wasn't gonna go on and do this anyways. She was just gonna eat breakfast and, and, and leave. And they ended up becoming like best friends. They were crying together. They were hugging each other, and the podcast was so inspirational. And this was somebody who threatened to leave because they didn't like the perception of what they thought of the other guest. And that is a microcosm of what happened during the whole recording session, which was six episodes, six different pairings of 12 people. Everyone, of course, there were some minor disagreements, but everyone left feeling so inspired some, some of the guests who are some A-list people were like, this is one of the best weeks of my life. It was one of the most inspirational,

uplifting weeks of my life, and I've known for years that this is possible. And just getting these people in the room to share those stories, to share a stage together that will now be public on YouTube for people to see, not a single one was adversarial and I and it, and they got to depth, they were talking about. Ccra, I mean, they got to talk to about sex and religion and like a whole host. Like we, we brought them together to talk about the environment, but they ended up just opening up about everything and it was so cool.

Kousha Navidar: It sounds like something that I'd wanna watch, and it makes me wonder about the ways in which we talk about these issues and all the way down to like the specific words that we use, which I think is a good opportunity to talk about something I noticed about your website, which is that on Nature is Nonpartisans website actually couldn't find a single use of the word climate. Like I, I saw. Preventing wildfires. I saw improving water infrastructure, ensuring natural disaster resilience, which all kind of, I think the root there is improving the climate. Uh, can you tell me about that? Is like climate a, a dirty word when you're trying to talk about this to different sides?

Benji Backer: It's a really good point. And first of all, for those who care about climate change, like climate change is a main driver for me, and I'm, I'm unashamed in saying that. I mean, if you read my book or if you look at anything I've ever said in an interview, like, I obviously believe in climate change and it's important for us to solve. The reality is that climate change is all of that, right? And. The other reality is that people's reason for caring about climate change usually revolves around nature. Like people wanna leave the planet better than they found it, or they're worried about the air quality, or they're worried about the heat. So they're worried about the plants that are dying or the animal, like they're worried about the physical environment around them more than they're worried about like the science of parts per million in the atmosphere. So if we're going to bring people into a movement, we have to meet them where they're at, what they care about, You know, if you care about hunting or you care about fishing or you care about hiking or you care about the forest, that's your why, your WHY, that's what we need to tap into. And when you talk about climate. Half of the country thinks that you are meaning something that's different than what you and I want it to mean, which is leaving the world better than we found it. Lowering carbon emissions so that we have a more healthy, livable planet. When people hear climate change, they don't think of that. They

Kousha Navidar: do they think of? Yeah, sorry. Go ahead, please.

Benji Backer: Socialism, they think of. The government telling you what car you can and can't drive. They think of the government telling you what stove you can and can't use. They think about the government telling you what jobs you can and can't have. That's the perception of climate in most communities. It has nothing to do with climate itself. That's some work that we have to do over time to show people that that's not true. But I would rather build a movement centered around what people care about and genuinely like, this isn't like some like ulterior motive, like genuinely get people. To get involved in the issues that they care about and then help them realize that, oh, this is all climate. If you restore the forest, that's good for climate. If you have better sustainable agriculture practices, that's good for the climate. If you have more abundant, diverse energy sources, that's good for the climate.

Kousha Navidar: I wanna step in there because that makes sense if the idea is to get more people into the tent, and I actually, I think that's super important. But at what point do you think then it is appropriate to get real and upfront about climate as an underlying cause? Like, is that along the path, or, or do you, it, does it not factor in eventually for you?

Benji Backer: it absolutely factors in, but I think we can do both simultaneously. So what I mean by that is if you are able to rewild a huge part of America and restore ecosystems, if you're able to embrace more sustainable agriculture practices, restore forests, restore oceans, not under the name

of climate, you get so many more people on board and it also lowers emissions. And simultaneously you can start building the trust around the word and around the term. I don't know what timeline that is and I'm not, again, I'm not trying to die away from it, but I think you can do both simultaneously.

Kousha Navidar: What I hear you saying is it's about scaffolding for you, right? Like

Benji Backer: but still make climate progress along the way. Just make it about what people care about and not make it about this umbrella term that oftentimes turns people off, but you could actually get to the same end goal by just talking about what people care about.

Kousha Navidar: Well, I mean, talking about progress, I mean, you said you've been in this for 18 years. What policy areas have you found the most bipartisan traction on going on in Washington? Like policy areas where Democrats and Republicans, everyone can actually work together on conservation related issues.

Benji Backer: Well, I think you've seen some of the most bipartisan historic bills ever happen in the last 10 years, and you've also seen some of the worst things happen environmentally in the last 10 years. Unfortunately, we only know about the latter, and I'm not trying to shy away from that. And those are, those are real. But we passed the largest national park investment ever. It would pass, uh, 98 to two or something. We passed the largest investment in sustainable agriculture ever, and it passed with over 90% of the vote. We've passed multiple huge forest restoration initiatives. Um, we are seeing emissions actually drop overall in the country, and that's largely because of states that are working well on climate, and on the environment. But a lot of them are red states. There's also a lot of blue states, but there is a lot of progress and it's largely around, again, conservation related issues. And then getting the left and the right to work together on energy and transportation related things is harder when you make it just about climate. But when you make it about the economy, when you make it about national security, when you make it about economic development in a specific state or a specific region and you make it about climate, all those things simultaneously, then you get more people on board. So there is a lot of opportunity for progress. And what's, what's really frustrating for me is that. the left only wants to talk about climate and the right only wants to talk about economic development. And in reality, there is a Venn diagram overlap there that both sides are sort of missing.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, it makes sense that those are the kind of two parts of the arguments that you hear from either side.

Benji Backer: I had a really cool story. I was on a road trip to highlight climate progress around the country in 2020, and I went to a, a wind turbine manufacturer, uh, facility in South Dakota, one of the most Republican states in the country where they're leading. The country and renewables, at least in terms of the percentage of renewables that's used. And they sell it to other states. And one of the guys who was making the wind turbines was like, one day my daughter woke up and she really cared about the climate and she asked me if I was a climate activist or environmentalist and I said no. And then she heard that I went to go work at a wind turbine manufacturing facility and she said, daddy, you are an environmentalist. And he was like. Wait a second, maybe I am. And he was like proud to tell me this story and he's, he was an avid outdoorsman and lover of nature and he just hadn't made the connection that maybe working in renewables from an economic perspective made him a climate activist and that he was unashamed then. And I think that that's a really cool anecdote.

Kousha Navidar: That is a cool anecdote. Um. Benji, where do you feel like your work has had the most impact over the last 18 years?

Benji Backer: I think first it was showing that conservatives could engage in a way that was not antithetical to their values. We were really instrumental in passing some of those bipartisan laws that I listed off and the organization that I founded, ACC has a hundred thousand conservatives who are part of it, who are care deeply about the environment and climate. So I think that's a massive impact, but. When I think about where I want to be in 50, 60 years, and we're only, we're less than one year into building nature is nonpartisan, and there's a lot of growth that we're gonna have in 2026 that I'm really excited to share with everybody. I really want this to be the environmental movement of the 21st century. That's, that's the legacy that I want this organization to leave. So it's not about me. It's about how do we build something that's durable, that politicians listen to, and. Act on because they know that Americans stand behind them, and that's gonna take a lot longer. So I can't say it's a success yet, but, that's the big audacious goal that I have for, for the next phase.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. I think that's such a lovely sentiment to close out, but you mentioned not just that nature is nonpartisan. I I is like trying to be cultural but also fun.

I think I heard you say what does fun look like to you? With nature is nonpartisan.

Benji Backer: Well, nature's nonpartisan itself. Our team is fun. Our mission's fun because we're kind of going against the grain of what people think is possible. But our campaigns that we're about to launch are all super fun. So we're about to launch something called Going Public where we're gonna allow every American to claim a share of their favorite public land because it's already something that they own as an American and their public lands. And people will be able to get a certificate to put up on their wall or in their office that says, I'm a proud public landowner of Ex National Park or Ex National Forest. But when you do that, again, it's free. It automatically tells your senators and congresspeople that you want public lands to be funded and maintained. And so. It'll be this kind of like, and, and there's gonna be a cool stock leaderboard of the, of the, of the national parks and forests or people that can track their favorite place and rally their friends to support their favorite place. And it'll be super fun campaign that people can have some ownership on, literally. But they can also be advocating for what they care about at the same time. And so instead of like, sign this petition, otherwise your life's gonna end or show up to this protest because the world sucks. It's like, no, take an action. And you get to benefit from it in some way, whether just because it's fun or because you can track your favorite land to win, or you can get a certificate in the mail that you can put in your office. And that's just one small example of the type of, uh, you know, fun initiatives that we're gonna make people feel like they want to join a movement.

Kousha Navidar: If you were gonna pick a share of public land, where would it be?

Benji Backer: my favorite public land is probably the Nicolette National Forest in northern Wisconsin, because that's where I fell in love with the outdoors or the Olympic National Park.

Kousha Navidar: I love that. I think mine would be the Adirondacks in upstate New York 'cause that's where I grew up and I went on many, many long bike rides there and I had a lot of time to think and I really appreciated it.

Benji Backer: Well, you gotta rally your friends and family to support that one so it wins because it's gonna run until May 30th. So you've got some time to rally everybody.

Kousha Navidar: Awesome. Benji Backer is founder, and CEO of nature is nonpartisan. Benji, thanks for hanging out with us on Climate One.

Benji Backer: Super fun. Thanks, and I'll be back.

Kousha Navidar: Coming up, a conservative group in rural Virginia embraces solar energy, and disregards the politics.

Skyler Zunk: We're united with our neighbors in rural Virginia that we want clean air. That we want clean water, that we want to be good stewards of our land, and we want our neighbors to be good stewards of their land.

Kousha Navidar: That's up next, on Climate One.

Ariana Brocious: This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious.

In today's politicized world, there's a popular conception that solar power is embraced mostly by people on the left. But in conservative rural Virginia, a group called Energy Right wants to be a resource for farmers and others to help them understand the value that solar projects could bring to their communities. Especially small-scale community solar, either on rooftops or in a larger array co-owned by members of the community.

Last year, Climate One's Greg Dalton spoke with Skyler Zunk, Co-founder and CEO of Energy Right to better understand how rural communities are embracing solar.

Greg Dalton: You spent 18 months as a special assistant with the Interior Department during the first Trump administration. I'm curious how that experience influenced the way you view energy.

Skyler Zunk: Yeah, well, really enjoyed my time during Trump's first term in Washington at the Department of the Interior. I had the chance to see how the department works, I, in my opinion, it's the coolest cabinet agency in all of Washington, dealing with our public lands, our outdoor spaces, our natural resources, both onshore and offshore, uh, gave me the incredible opportunity to see energy policy take place at the federal level. Seeing how these large energy projects were permitted on federal lands onshore, uh, offshore wind, offshore oil and gas exploration as well. Um, really learned a lot, got to see a lot of our nation's experts in action, trying to make America more energy independent during Trump's first term, and have really translated that work into some of our day to day operations here in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Greg Dalton: Right, and you started an organization, Energy Right. Can you explain what Energy Right does and how it came to be?

Skyler Zunk: Yeah, my colleague and I launched Energy Right as a non profit organization dedicated to clean energy education in rural conservative Virginia. We want the right side of the aisle to be engaged on the clean energy conversation. Wherever it takes place, uh, there's a lot of new energy generation taking place across the country. Virginia is absolutely no exception to that, uh, bringing on, uh, hundreds of thousands of megawatts of new clean energy year to year. It's a big challenge to meet across Virginia's 95 counties, to permit these projects, to answer questions that local community residents have, local elected officials have in the permitting process. What is a solar project? What is a solar farm? What does it mean for my community in terms of land use elements in terms of local taxation? So we launched this and are now at a team of five folks all across the Commonwealth traveling very routinely to get out to these counties to let them know what our vision for clean energy the right way is.

Greg Dalton: And say you show up in a rural county in Virginia, what language do you use when you talk about energy? What values do you touch on? How does that start? And what's the case for clean energy in rural Virginia?

Skyler Zunk: Well, the case for new energy development and overwhelmingly clean energy is that we need it for our economy to grow. Virginia is facing some of the highest increases in energy demand year for year. We need to find some way to meet that, that is affordable, effective, and secure. Overwhelmingly that means more solar power coming online within the Commonwealth as the cheapest way to put a new electron on the grid as part of a overall, all of the above energy strategy. My colleagues and I have experience working in rural Virginia on political campaigns on a number of different fronts and utilize our networks and really just to see who we can meet out in the, uh, in the corners of the Commonwealth that are pursuing clean energy development to let them know we're here as a resource.

Greg Dalton: I heard you talk about the importance of price. Sometimes clean energy is thought of as a coastal elite thing, liberal thing. I'm just curious if you have to encounter, overcome some of those maybe initial resistance to that clean energy thing.

Skyler Zunk: Yeah. Unfortunately, to your point, clean energy has been politicized. We think that's very unfortunate because you need both sides of the aisle working in unison to make sure our energy portfolio advances with cost effectiveness, security in mind. Some of the biggest supporters that we meet of these projects. Some of the landowners that own the land underneath a solar farm and lease it to an energy company for a long term land lease are very conservative, want limited government, limited government in scope, want clean energy to, you know, it advances as steadily as possible and just want to utilize their private property how they see fit. That's big in rural Virginia, that's big in conservatism. Some of the folks working these projects, um, electricians, uh, folks maintaining the vegetation in and around solar farms, some folks grazing their flocks of sheep to maintain the vegetation under solar panels are, uh, as, as rural, as conservative, as a rock solid Virginian, as you can get. We think the clean energy industry will be the beneficiary of conservative involvement on these topics and implementing, you know, competition, market driven approaches to clean energy wherever we can.

Greg Dalton: You mentioned sheep farmers. I saw a video on your website of a sheep farmer. Was he third or fourth generation? Proudly talking about his heritage and, you know, with some solar panels in the background. So sheep and solar, you don't think of sheep and solar often together, which is this new thing called agrovoltaic. So tell us about that person and what he embodies.

Skyler Zunk: Yeah, Greg, you're referring to our friend, Matt English, who is born and raised in Appomattox County, Virginia, right, right smack dab central Virginia, who has been raising livestock, has been a lifelong farmer, a multi generation farming history in central Virginia, and he's just farming a different way that's working very well for him, for the folks he's hired, to graze his flocks of sheep under panel. He's very proud of the agricultural products that he creates while doing a service to the energy company, keeping the grass, uh, maintained at proper levels to make sure it doesn't overgrow the panels. Matt's a great story. It's phenomenal that he's found a solar project on his home turf, in his home county that he can work, that he can utilize to create a new agricultural product. A lot of folks talk about clean energy projects displacing agriculture, but in Matt's case, he's creating new agriculture, a new agricultural product out of land that was really just a timber farm prior to prior to that solar project. So it's a great example. Many thousands of acres of solar farms across Virginia are being farmed with sheep solar grazing.

Greg Dalton: Sheep and solar, the new combination. Well, Northern Virginia is quite urban, close to Washington, D.C. A lot of data centers, tech, AOL was based there. There's a huge growing demand for energy by data, those data centers. How's that affecting your work? You know, I know there can be something of a difference between the rural parts of the state and northern urban Virginia, which is different politically, culturally.

Skyler Zunk: Yeah, well, we need more energy online in Virginia for a multitude of different reasons, certainly including the data center development that is, uh, focused right on Virginia. I think half of the world's internet traffic. Virginia at one point, and that's a huge economic opportunity for us to take advantage of. It's also a huge challenge in order to power these things. Um, Virginia relies on our neighboring states to power Virginia homes and businesses. So about a third of the energy I'm using right now is coming from another state. We're not an energy independent state. We need to be, and we need to do that in tandem with providing enough energy to power data centers, to power homes, businesses all up and down the line.

Greg Dalton: One of the challenges also is neighbors who don't want to look at transmission lines. They don't want to look at solar. So are there examples of how you've overcome neighborhood objections to some of the clean energy projects? Might be good for your, our, you know, sheep farming friend, Matt, but his neighbors be like, I'm not getting some money, so I don't want it to happen.

Skyler Zunk: Our adjoining neighbor here, where I grew up, actually exercised a solar lease and got a solar project permitted about 400 acres on a 2000 acre timber tract. I got to see this firsthand as, as a neighbor to this project, dealing with the folks I grew up around my family in this area, talking about what a solar project will be as a neighbor versus the many other things our neighboring landowner could have exercised her right to develop the land, into a neighborhood, into a mall, into anything. Luckily, we have a neighbor that we know for the next 40 years and that's going to be a couple hundred acres of solar panels quietly producing clean energy right here in our neck of the woods. So we predict we won't see very many power outages being a neighbor to an energy generation facility. It will be priority number one with restoring any down lines that might happen in the future, but a lot of our work focused on rural Virginia counties, educating these folks and answering questions that neighbors rightfully have when there's a new land use coming in, you know, adjacent to them, focuses a lot on the fundamentals. I mean, these projects have been in the field operating safely across the country for decades now, and these things can be good permanent neighbors that eventually are returned to their original state or better. So once this solar project reaches the end of its useful life, it will be returned to timber, it will be returned to farming, whatever that landowner wants to do at the end of its life, it can be absolutely returned to that.

Greg Dalton: That sounds like a lot better than a mall and certainly a lot less traffic than a mall next door. And how important do you think it is that you're seen as, you know, one of us, that you're, you know, the way you look, the way you talk, you're not some outsider coming in to tell people what they ought to do with their energy. How important is it to kind of be from Virginia for Virginia?

Skyler Zunk: You know, I think it's very important. We're working in the same communities that we live in or have worked in in the past. Our mantra is that no one is well served by bad information. There's a lot of good information that we need to get into these folks' hands that are from trusted university sources, Virginia Tech, JMU, University of Virginia, as the energy portfolio in these counties change. Virginia, you know, the way we're powering our future is changing some communities that have never been host to an energy generation facility of any of any type are now being host to solar facilities or battery energy storage systems that are new, that are different, coming from Republican politics, having worked in a lot of these communities, I think it does open the door to us. We're not coming into these communities, talking about priorities that folks in Washington or Richmond talk about, you know, our clean energy, or our clean energy mandates or our clean energy goals or climate change. I mean, we're united with our neighbors in rural Virginia that we want clean air. That we want clean water, that we want to be good stewards of our land, and we want our neighbors to be good stewards of their land. It's just about approaching this, this conversation honestly. And with as many good resources as we can put in front of folks. We're going to focus most of our work, if not all of our work, on the local level. Making sure that folks who are

permitting these projects have the tools they need to decide what's best for themselves and their community in the long term. I mean, there's some elements, including the domestic component threshold within the IRA that I think is good. It increased American manufacturing of solar panels and clean energy technology. That's good. I mean, when we have American made solar panels deployed within Virginia, within other parts of the country producing clean for the long term. I think that's an all around win. Solar deployment nearly doubled during President Trump's first term. There's nothing I see that says that that can't happen again in his second term. And, um, you know, I think in all of the above strategy certainly includes renewables, storage, solar energy, et cetera. And I expect that to continue across the country.

Greg Dalton: Well, Skyler Zunk, I appreciate you sharing your insights and encouraging me that clean energy is going to go forward. It's not the disaster narrative that I sometimes hear on the left. So it's really encouraging to hear what you're doing on a very pragmatic local level in Virginia. Thank you.

Skyler Zunk: Thanks, Greg. We certainly hope to make solar great again, as best we can here in Virginia and beyond. It's going to be an important energy source for the long term. So appreciate you inviting me on.

Greg Dalton: You're going to get some hats with that logo or slogan on it?

Skyler Zunk: It's crossed my mind more than once.

Greg Dalton: Okay, well send us one when you do, please, to your friends in San Francisco.

Skyler Zunk: Will do. Thank you, Greg.

Kousha Navidar: And that’s our show. Thanks for listening. Talking about climate can be hard, and exciting and interesting -- AND it’s critical to address the transitions we need to make in all parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. Or consider joining us on Patreon and supporting the show that way.

Ariana Brocious: Climate One is a production of the Commonwealth Club. Our team includes Greg Dalton, Brad Marshland, Jenny Park, Austin Colón, Megan Biscieglia, Kousha Navidar and Rachael Lacey. Our theme music is by George Young. I’m Ariana Brocious.