

Muskie School Graduation Keynote by Dr. Lisa Pohlmann
May 10, 2019

It is such a pleasure to be here today. Thank you, Firooza Pavri, for inviting me. Although my days at the Muskie School are further and further behind me, I remember them fondly and am so grateful every day that I had the chance to learn from the faculty and students in my cohorts, like Erica Ziller!

I love that Maine is my home. I moved here in 1979 at the age of 24. I managed to find meaningful work, too. So far, I have worked at a non-profit committed to stopping domestic violence, and another that addresses poverty and health care. And now I get to work on the issue that brought me to Maine in the first place: protecting the fresh air, clean water, and great forests and wildlife that I can enjoy right out my back door in Jefferson, as well as all over the state.

I have had the great pleasure of leading the Natural Resources Council of Maine and am now in my 9th year. For those who are not familiar with us, NRCM is Maine's leading environmental advocate, and one of the largest and most effective state-based, non-profit conservation organizations in the country.

This year, we are proud to be celebrating NRCM's 60th anniversary. It all began in 1959 when a handful of people who care about Maine came together to protect the Allagash River from a dam project that would've ruined it. With grit and determination, my predecessors won that battle and many battles since then. Now I get to paddle that federally designated Wild and Scenic River. Maybe you have paddled it, too? I am so thankful that NRCM founders had the foresight to know that what we had was worth keeping—forever.

NRCM uses policy, legal, and scientific expertise in combination with grassroots engagement across the state. It is our winning formula. NRCM's staff experts are on the leading edge of policy and research in their fields. They are in constant contact with our elected officials and decision makers and know how to find the political windows necessary to move progressive policies forward. We work with many other nonprofits and with businesses, too, who understand that a healthy environment is good for our people and our economy.

We also need our 25,000 members and supporters from across the state and the country – all who care about Maine -- to make their voices heard. When we call them, they respond. They email and phone their elected officials, come to Augusta to testify at public hearings—sometimes from hundreds of miles away— all to weigh in about this place they love. In fact, Maine would not be the same place it is today without NRCM, and NRCM *is* all of these people speaking up over the last 60 years.

You are graduating from programs that bring you closer to the inner workings of government, politics, and policy making. We need you to be at the podium, too, and soon, because we have a lot to learn from you.

We are in very challenging times, when the very foundation of who we are as a country is becoming mired in confusion. Our differences around identity and beliefs are creating divisions so raw that I wonder sometimes if they can ever be healed. But when I was at the Muskie School, we learned about times in our history that were very divisive, and how we recovered and kept moving forward.

I am hopeful when I look out at each of you today and recall my own education. I assume you came to Muskie because you want to make a difference for yourselves and others. Like me, I hope you have gained a firm foundation, a stronger passion, and a road to take you forward. Because if our experience in Maine right now is any indication, there is a lot of hope and opportunity still out there.

At NRCM, we have struggled through the last eight years with a governor and administration whose actions and attitudes toward the environment ran counter to the values we knew Maine people held dear for decades. In the face of such disregard for nature, NRCM did what we have always done: start with science and the law; work in collaboration with our allies; rally our members; and then helped to defeat most attempts to roll back the environmental safeguards put into place by those who have gone before us. We also stood up to the personal attacks levied against us as an organization by the Governor and his ilk.

Now, with new leadership in Augusta, it is truly a new day. We don't just have to play defense now – we are having productive conversations about how to help move forward an ambitious climate action plan, clean water protections, our land conservation program, and to stop the scourge of plastic pollution. In fact, in late April, Maine became the first state in the country to ban polystyrene, better known as Styrofoam, in food packaging!

It gives me hope to see that Mainers have not been too tainted by the negativity thrown at us by our previous governor. Teachers, immigrants, health care professionals, poverty advocates, environmental defenders– we all got the brunt of the previous governor's rage at one time or another. But fighting back

against his regressive policies also gave us strength and helped us build coalitions we can use now to move forward. We are returning to being civil with each other under our new leadership and walking calmly past those who remain uncivil. And it's not just civility that has been restored. We've begun to act based on our values again. And this shows everyone that we are all stronger when we hold each other up, regardless of where we live or where we come from. That is the Maine I love. And it gives me hope for the rest of the country too.

One of the things very much on my mind is how we can continue to reach across a very intentional partisan divide that is being driven between us and our neighbors. Maine people traditionally have a deep environmental ethic. We live close to the land and know its spiritual and economic value. We used to be able to connect across those partisan divides because of our shared values. But that shared sense of purpose has been interrupted by an intense disinformation and bullying campaign that has been halting progress.

Based on my experience in Augusta in just the past few months, I find we are in a new and, hopefully, more connected era. It is a time when we can have honest, open dialogue about the problems we face and come together to solve them. Now some of our most promising climate action bills are bipartisan pieces of legislation. The solar bill was finally printed this week and is being led by Republican Senator Dana Dow from my district, and he is pleased to do so.

I am no longer so worried that the partisan divide we're seeing nationally will define our future. Maine's experience shows that with the right leadership, regardless of political party, we are bigger and better than some would have us believe. And you, as individuals who have had the privilege of education and who

love our land and waters and each other – your leadership will be key to our shared future.

Part of this process is knowing that you don't have all the answers - that you need to continue to listen to and learn from other people's experiences. At NRCM, like many groups, we are seeking new opportunities to work on diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. For example, we have begun to explore how to best equip our staff with the tools to respond when we are talking with someone who shares our view on an environmental issue, but who then makes a racist or sexist or homophobic remark. What should our response be? How can we support them back at the office? We are also contemplating a new model for field outreach that is better rooted in the experiences of local communities. We are doing all of this while we are continuing our policy work and maximizing the public's engagement, as we have always done.

Last year we held an event at USM on Climate Change and National Security that included a panel of recent immigrants to Maine from Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, and Zambia. They shared their experiences of growing violence and scarcity in their home countries due to climate change. We are assessing how we can use our organizational voice to reinforce important issues like these. The environmental, social, and economic topics that we deal with are interconnected and ever-evolving. Our organizations need to keep evolving, too. Your education does not stop at this door and, hopefully, continues throughout your life.

So these are the ideas I leave with you today:

1. Now that you are on the “inside” as a Muskie graduate, use what you’ve learned in your education and in your career to benefit the public good. Make your voice heard. You matter. You can change the course of history and help others do the same.
2. Don’t allow the partisan-dividers to win. Reach out to your neighbors and listen to their stories. Talk to them about what matters to you. Find common ground. If nowhere else, you are likely to find it during a walk in the woods. We have a saying at NRCM: Relationships matter more than facts. We don’t say that lightly because we really love facts!
3. Maine’s population is changing. We have so much to gain by embracing that in every way possible. We must become conscious about how we act and what we say. We need to understand how our history has ignored people like Maine’s Native Americans, and make sure we don’t repeat these mistakes with New Mainers, old Mainers, young Mainers, Mainers who struggle with economic security, and so on.
4. Political administrations come and go. Hot button issues come and go. But we are all still here. Don’t burn your bridges. Your foe today is your friend tomorrow.
5. Finally, keep that fire inside of you burning by taking care of yourself, especially by enjoying all that Maine has to offer. The trees and woods and waters will be here forever if we take good care of them.

Congratulations and thank you for your work here at the Muskie School and in your careers so far. Let me know if I can help you as you keep going forward.