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Environmental Influencers

By Nancy Novick and Michael Blanding

With a recent spate of extreme weather events, alarming reports of rising temperatures, threats to human communities, and an accelerated loss of wildlife habitat, the consensus is clear: Creating a sustainable future has never been more urgent—or more complicated. Combatting global warming by reducing carbon emissions, preserving biodiversity, and creating healthy places to live, work, and play is a formidable challenge. But a number of Vassar alums are making significant impacts on the ways we see and understand the crisis and are driving home the need to act.



Conservation and the Law:

Nathaniel Stevens '88 and Susan Crane '80

For decades, communities have recognized the importance of conserving land for natural beauty and animal habitats. It's only recently, however, that they've started recognizing the importance to mitigating larger environmental impacts. Some have used the law to hold the line on environmental degradation.

"People need to think, what does it mean, not just for my particular project or house, but what are the measures we need to take to be resilient against the effects of climate-change?" says Nathaniel Stevens '88, a Massachusetts-based environmental lawyer. "People are getting more educated about these issues, but it's still a challenge."



Susan Crane '80 speaks at a rally for Roll/Stroll for Hunger, which raised funds to alleviate hunger due to climate factors.

Stevens represents neighbors who may have concerns about the impact of projects, municipalities who want to enforce environmental permits, and developers looking to develop in a sustainable way. He also serves on the conservation commission of his hometown of Arlington, MA, where he advocates for a broader perspective on the importance of land conservation. Massachusetts, he says, has long been a national model for laws protecting wetlands and other sensitive environments. More recently, it's passed even more forward-looking laws for environmental protection. Its Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness program (MVP) provides grants to communities to proactively assess the threats due to climate change and prioritize projects to make the community more resilient. As part of a more sweeping climate-change law, it established Environmental Justice communities that have borne more than their fair share of pollution and other environmental impacts, requiring developers to consider the cumulative impact of new projects.



Nathaniel Stevens

Courtesy of the subjects

Stevens still thinks communities could do more. "One person can't solve all these problems, but we all contribute to the problems that cause climate change, and we can all contribute to the things that help a community build resiliency."

A couple dozen miles farther outside Boston, Susan Crane '80 has observed

the changes to her suburban town of Stow firsthand over the past few decades. "I bought a house in a suburban neighborhood surrounded by woods, and now outside my window all I see are houses," she says. "We've lost our birds. We don't often see the foxes that used to travel through our yard." An environmental lawyer focusing on hazardous-waste cleanup, Crane has also been passionate about conservation law, serving on the conservation trust board of her town and representing clients in land conservation deals. Laws granting tax breaks for land sales in exchange for permanent restrictions on

development are key to creating more preserved land, Crane says. “If you’ve got property and you are ready to retire, you could sell to a developer, or sell to a municipality and maybe not get top dollar, but with tax breaks it’s a win-win for everyone.” Even in a progressive state like Massachusetts, however, caps on funds for buying conservation land sometimes lead to long waiting periods for sellers, who get frustrated and sell to developers instead, Crane says.

From a broader perspective, she is heartened by trends in development against single-family homes with large tracts and in favor of denser development surrounded by a healthy amount of green space. “You cluster smaller, sustainable houses with wide swaths of open space for shared recreation,” she says. “Maybe you even get them off the grid with solar power and shared septic systems. That is the wave of the future.”—MB