“Purposeful Alternatives to Protest” by Suzanne Traub-Metlay, TED President

NAGT members take seriously our responsibility to advocate for science and science education, especially geoscience education. Proudly wearing NAGT T-shirts, many participated in the April 2017 March for Science nationally or at the local level. Political protest, for some, has become a defining feature of personal time and NAGT is an active partner with the on-going nonpartisan March for Science movement (1).

Not everyone is comfortable taking a public role. Many science educators find it more effective to win hearts and minds by representing the benefits of science literacy throughout the year, through fun public events or more long-term community service. These are not exclusive – one can publicly march and privately volunteer. It is wise to remember that there are purposeful alternatives to protest.

In the short-term, give the public positive experiences – for example, take advantage of the upcoming “All-American” eclipse on 21 August 2017 to talk about astronomy education, the importance of dark-sky sites, or the relevance of public parks. At other times, engage seniors as well as students in community participation events & citizen science opportunities. Make public presentations. Volunteer in K-12 classrooms or afterschool STEM clubs.

Whenever possible, emphasize common ground with the larger community. Ranchers & farmers care about their land; hunters and fishers pay through licensing fees for more pristine natural environments. For those of progressive religious faith, “creation care” means environmental stewardship. Millennials and post-millennials, meaning anyone born after 1985, care deeply about the global commons as well as their own local communities.

In the long-term, they want to see scientists and science educators serve their (our) communities. Whether you get out in front of your neighbors or quietly blog from home, advocate for science education or support pro-science candidates. 2018 is an election year – contribute with time or money or volunteer effort in campaigns from local school board to Congress. Social media may be attributable or anonymous – use posts, chats, retweets, etc. to further your message.

NAGT reminds us to act “in ways that are inclusive of all people and respectful of different political viewpoints. Our goal is to build strong support for science and science education across all people and political parties” (2).

Avoid lobbying in the name of NAGT – as a 501(c)(3) organization, there are limits to political activities, especially for or against particular candidates, elected officials, or legislation. NAGT must stay nonpartisan and non-specific to preserve its tax-exempt status. As an individual, however, you are free to lobby or otherwise participate in the political process.
Please follow the “NAGT Code of Conduct:

1. Treat all people with respect regardless of whether or not you agree with their point of view — listen and be kind.
2. Obey the law and respond immediately to any requests by officials.
3. Use your best skills as an educator when discussing science and science education with others:
   o Support learning and active inquiry - engage, don’t tell
   o Start from others’ current understandings and draw on their life experiences - listen first
   o Be respectful of others’ emotions - fear and anger inhibit learning” (3).

Remind your listeners that geoscientists and geoscience educators are generally not anti-religious or always politically liberal; we are all over the faith and political spectrum. You are not trying to convert or defend science as the only “right” way to think. Reassure that science provides critical thinking skills that help discern reality from fake news. Intellectual diversity is valued while unsupported arguments in science must be let go. Science is a human endeavor; scientists and science educators strive to understand and enrich the human experience.

If you must disagree, please do so civilly in person and online. Karin Kirk noted in an investigation for Yale Climate Connections that “… it’s possible to disagree while still maintaining basic social order…. it’s also possible to agree in an uncivil way” (4). Show the benefits of your point of view. Don’t just knock down others’ arguments – build up. Be concrete, not vague – use specific examples relevant to your local area.

In January 2017, James Delingpole on Breitbart.com quoted an unnamed source as saying, “If you dig up stuff, if you make stuff, if you grow stuff then for the first time since Reagan you have a president who has actually got your back” (5). That’s a great opportunity to point out that those who “dig up stuff… make stuff… [and] grow stuff” are employed in mining, manufacturing and farming – all dependent on responsible natural resource management and healthy ecosystems. Conserve is at the heart of conservative - preserving land heritage and legacy (such as maintaining public lands against private encroachment) empowers future economic growth.

For those who personally remember President Ronald Reagan, remind them that in his 1984 State of the Union address he famously said, “Preservation of our environment is not a liberal or conservative challenge, it’s common sense.” He then went on to request “for EPA one of the largest percentage budget increases of any agency” and a range of other federal actions to preserve vital natural resources. (6). Reagan considered his 1988 ratification of the Montreal Protocol to avoid destruction of the world’s ozone layer to be “a monumental achievement” based on scientific study (7).

A recent Cornell university study reported that “74.4 percent of respondents who identified as Republicans said they believed that climate change is really happening” (8). Climate conscious conservatives use websites like http://www.republicen.org/alerts. On 20 June 2017, the conservative-leaning Climate Leadership Council ran a full page ad in the Wall Street Journal calling for “a consensus climate solution that bridges partisan divides, strengthens our economy and protects our shared environment” – founding members range from ExxonMobil to the Nature Conservancy (9).

Americans will gather this summer for many community events such as 4th of July picnics and August eclipse parties. Use your expertise and experience as geoscientists and geoscience educators to join your neighbors in celebrating the wonders of our shared environment - teach them why they are worth
preserving. Sometimes we need to march and shout. Other times, it may be more effective to be a quiet but consistent voice advocating for science education and environmental conservation.

References:

(2) Ibid.
(3) Ibid.

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