

Your Health Unlocked Podcast Episode 43

Public Health and the Environmental Harms of Extractive Capitalism with Kelley Dennings

Hi there, I'm Adele Scheiber, the host of the Your Health Unlocked podcast and Director of Communications here at the National Women's Health Network.

In honor of the rapidly approaching Earth Day, we wanted to explore the intersection between women's health and the environment. The current environmental crisis isn't limited to melting ice caps and deforestation. It's about the air we breathe, the food we eat, and our daily choices that have a ripple effect on our health, rights, and the economy. Join us for a fascinating conversation with Kelley Dennings, a campaigner with the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, to learn about the health hazard of plastic, why plant-based diets are more than just a fad, and the need for both personal and systemic change to improve our health and the world we live in.

0:00:03 - Adele Scheiber

Welcome Kelley, our newest super fan of the Your Health Unlocked podcast. [Kelley - Thanks, it's great to be here.] So, tell us a little bit about yourself and the organization that you work for.

0:00:14 - Kelley Dennings

Sure, sure. Well, first let me say my pronouns are she and her [Adele - oh yeah, that's good, I always forget.] and I work for my home in Jacksonville, Florida, otherwise known as Miccosukee, Timucua and Seminole land, where many individuals face displacement and suffering, and we hope one day they receive restorative measures. I also like to give up a description of myself before I start these conversations. One to acknowledge the privilege that I hold in these conversations, but also because folks can't see me. So, I'm a short, white, middle-class, able-bodied, middle-aged, cis-gender woman with short brown hair standing in my office.

0:00:56 - Adele Scheiber

Middle aged. [Kelley - I know it's rough.] I wouldn't have said that.

0:01:04 - Kelley Dennings

So anyway, yeah, I would just like to mention the privilege that I hold as I move throughout society with that.

0:01:11 - Adele Scheiber

I've got to take that, my privilege resume. I'm going to use that.

0:01:15 - Kelley Dennings

Yeah, hopefully it helps in case I say something inappropriate. I don't mean any harm, but on the personal side, in relationship to sexual and reproductive health, I grew up in a small town in Nebraska and then I went to college in the South and never really received good sex ed or great reproductive health care in either of those locations, and it wasn't really until I moved to the Washington DC area in my 30s that I really kind of felt like I had a good OBGYN that listened to me and then [Adele - that's a long wait for a good OBGYN.]

It was, it was. I do remember learning about an IUD in my late 20s, but I feel like that was even a little too late. And then, on the professional side of things, my undergrad degree was in environmental science, and then, as a mid-career professional now that we all have established that I'm middle age, I actually went back and got a master's in public health, and my interest was really working at the intersection of these two things environment and public health, and I didn't really want to abandon my expertise in the environment, and so I wasn't really sure if I could find a place that would work at that intersection, and I was fortunate to find my position at the Center for Biological Diversity, where they valued my past experience in the environment but were kind of willing to take a chance on somebody who had just gotten their MPH. So, I've been there five years now.

0:02:55 - Adele Scheiber

Don't you love those places?

0:02:57 - Kelley Dennings

Yeah, I'm really, really grateful, grateful for the opportunity, so kind of the 30 second, not even 30 second commercial about the center. So, we're a national nonprofit conservation organization that works to protect the Endangered Species Act and all that that encompasses, and we do that through a combination of science, the law, activism and creative media. So, I'm not a lawyer or a scientist, though I'm more on activism and creative media.

0:03:31 - Adele Scheiber

Yeah, well, you're a soul sister with me over here. It's like I don't really do any one thing. I don't have one expertise. I feel that. Well, so, I have to say I did a little reading up, obviously before we interviewed you, and the center is so cool. There are some campaigns that I hope you talk about that. I just was like, oh, I wish I'd thought of that. Honestly, it was so cool. But so, I read up and you are the something, the director of the population sustainability program. Can you talk a little bit about that?

0:04:03 - Kelley Dennings

Well, that is my boss. [Adele - oh, okay.]

0:04:06 - Kelley Dennings

I am a campaigner, but yeah, so the work that the center does really is trying to prevent the exploitation of people and the planet. So, the welfare of human beings is deeply linked to nature, and the loss of that impoverishes everybody. So, we kind of writ-large work on these root causes of environmental degradation that also harm humans, and so I like to say sometimes that I'm trying to bring down patriarchy and capitalism.

0:04:41 - Adele Scheiber

This is the right audience for that. That's fine.

0:04:45 - Kelley Dennings

Two minor things that I'm working on, but [Adele - just little project side projects yeah (laughter)] me alone will be successful. So, I work on this connection between reproductive health, gender equity, capitalism, the climate and extinction crises, and you know that brings in, of course, other systems of oppression also, and, as I'm sure many folks who listen to this know, the definition of reproductive justice, but that's definitely tenants that we follow. So, you know, we believe every person should have the right to choose if and when to have children and to do so in safe and healthy environments, and so that includes protecting the lands, water, climate, that other species and communities need.

0:05:36 - Adele Scheiber

So yeah, yeah, it's interesting. I'm glad that you mentioned outright that you guys were like for reproductive justice, because I did notice some very careful language on the website, like “we are for voluntary family planning,” right. So, it's, you know, because obviously the larger the population, right, the harder that is in the environment. But you guys also recognize that human autonomy to have children is paramount and very important. And you know you mentioned a lot of big things there. I think it was like five areas of study. So, I personally find that our listeners and myself, let's can we give an example of like a situation where, like, all of this stuff intersects, like maybe, maybe like an issue you guys are working on, or like a? And if you don't have one, I actually have one, so you go ahead.

0:06:26 - Kelley Dennings

Well, so I will say, and I know you wanted me to talk about one of our campaigns in particular, but-and I can still do that but I think the place where these all intersect is in this report that we did, and there were kind of like four buckets right and so we wrote a report titled the influence of environmental toxicity in equity and capitalism on reproductive health and there were four chapters.

0:06:54 - Kelley Dennings

There were four chapters, one on fossil fuel extraction, one on plastics, plastic products, industrial agriculture, and then climate change, and so I can talk about any one of those, but they really do intersect with the work that we do. So, we, the center, have a climate law institute, so you know, when we talk about gender justice in relation to climate justice, that's applicable. We have an environmental health program that's constantly working on

concentrated animal feeding operations and how that pollution harms reproductive health. We have an oceans team that works on plastics.

0:07:32 - Adele Scheiber

That's so much, let's talk about. Let's dig into one of them and then, honestly, you can talk about all four if you'd like. I think what I really want our listeners to understand is like the on the ground effects of things, like you know, the, like a lot of this stuff, like again, you live and breathe it. Like the toxic, like how, how does the pollution you know? So, let's dig in as many of those as you want.

0:07:54 - Kelley Dennings

So, okay. So let me take industrial agriculture. Okay, so these would be, you know, cattle and dairy, which you know are some of our larger polluters and more harmful to the environment than, say, you know, a soybean farm.

0:08:21 - Kelley Dennings

Yeah. So, let's take cattle and dairy. So, these are large industrial agriculture systems that you know. We could have large soybean-based systems, but you know that's a little bit different than animal agriculture. And so, there are pesticides that are put on to feed crops that harm the environment, that are then given to the cows and the cattle to eat, [Adele - right,] and then there is their waste, of course. So, when they poop and fart, we have, you know, methane production and waste that is produced, and these are what you know pollute our environment because it gets into our air, water and soil and then our food.

0:09:12 - Adele Scheiber

Well, all those E coli recalls of like, you know, the lettuce and all that stuff, mad cow, more common in like England and stuff, but you know those are real. That's like how it hits the consumer, right?

0:09:25 - Kelley Dennings

Correct, Correct, yeah. And I'll say the next one is climate change. I think this is a little bit more ubiquitous to people. I mean, everybody is dealing with, whether that be wildfire or hurricanes or floods extreme heat. This harms our health, but also, in particular, our reproductive health. You know so. Pregnant and birthing people are much more vulnerable to extreme heat.

0:09:54 - Adele Scheiber

I didn't know that, that's interesting.

0:09:57 - Kelley Dennings

Yeah, yeah, and each of these kind of have very specific reproductive harms that I can kind of go to in a minute. But I'll finish out with plastic products. Yeah, so a lot of people don't know this, but you know plastic is derived from fossil fuels. So, we are-. [Adele - I didn't know that.] Yeah so, the gasoline that you put in your car is a fossil fuel, and they use that same material to create plastics And-. Oh yeah, so plastics burn pretty well and, but they're very harmful when you burn plastic.

0:10:32 - Adele Scheiber

I was going to say, you know not to smell plastic. Like your whole body is like get away from me. Yes, yes.

0:10:39 - Kelley Dennings

So, we have a whole team that works to decrease what we call the petrochemical build out. So those same fossil fuel companies that want us not to move to renewable energy resources say oh, okay great. Then we'll just put our fossil fuel, extra fossil fuel into additional plastic products. So, there's a huge [Adele – Interesting] emphasis to try to put more plastic in our environment from those companies, [Adele - oh my gosh] Right.

0:11:14 - Adele Scheiber

So, because there, I get this now right Cause, like the electric car and Tesla, they tried to tell us 20 years later, it's coming back everybody wants a Tesla now. So, they're like, well, we're doing all this fuel and so they're trying desperately to unload those assets. That's crazy.

0:11:28 - Kelley Dennings

Yes, okay, and they're doing it a lot in developing countries and in the global south.

0:11:34 - Adele Scheiber

And those are the places that don't have the infrastructure. So, I did Peace Corps in Morocco, and I will never fricking forget when we turned left onto my village. There are plastic bags in the trees. Yeah, there's just everywhere. It's like blanketed with plastic bags. And I was like bro, why doesn't anybody like to recycle, like what's going on? And our teacher checked my privilege, she was like where would we recycle? Where, what do you? There's no truck that comes here, you know. So that's fascinating.

0:12:06 - Kelley Dennings

Well, it's unfortunate to hear, but a lot of our mixed plastic from the United States is actually delivered to those countries and they're personally picking through it for potentially reusable or recyclable plastics. But much of it is just finding its way into our environment and the water and the oceans. But plastics have a life cycle. So, there's this extractive of the fossil fuels. So, there's harm done when we extract the fossil fuels to make plastics and there's a lot of endocrine disrupting chemicals in that. So, there's these toxic pollutants that go into the environment and then, people don't always know this, but you can be exposed to these chemicals from the actual product, right?

So, like micro-waving in a plastic, you know to go container or something like that, and then when we dispose of them, we're also harming the environment and ourselves by micro-plastics in our landfills and oceans, or when we incinerate them or burn them, and it goes into the air. So, these are the main ways that we find pollution and chemicals that harm our environment and our health. We dove pretty deep into it in our report.

0:13:26 - Adele Scheiber

Yeah, and we will link that report in the show notes, and you anticipated my next question greatly, which is let's dig into how things like micro-plastics and extreme heat and all this stuff how do these harm women and reproductive health specifically? Because we love to talk about like harms the planet or harms, but we at the network we have a bugaboo about like no, but like women are different, right. Like when nobody rep, nobody talks about or people don't talk about enough in our opinion, how this affects women and birthing people specifically. So, I'd love to hear, like, what do you mean by endocrine disruption? Right, let's talk about that, because I don't think people know about this. This blew my mind when I found out about what plastic you can do to you a few years ago.

0:14:12 - Kelley Dennings

So yeah. So, we partnered on this report with a group called Nurses for Sexual and Reproductive Health and it was a continuing ed module for the nurses. And they did a great deep dive into endocrine disrupting chemicals, so I'm not necessarily the best expert on that, but these environmental pollutants can really just make planning for pregnancies more difficult. So toxic chemicals disrupt our fertility and sperm counts.

0:14:45 - Adele Scheiber

That's what I've heard. The sperm count has gone down by like half or something, right?

0:14:46 - Kelley Dennings

Yes, yes, and it really makes it harder to avoid unplanned pregnancies because we also find that you'll have changes in your menstrual cycles and so if you're focused on the fertility-based awareness method, it may be more difficult to use that and it can be more unreliable if you are encountering these toxins and then these irregular cycles delay your awareness of pregnancy, which could make it even harder for people living in restrictive areas with access to abortion. So, the Center works on abortion care and ensuring we have access to that. And then, specific to birthing people, environmental harm can cause high-risk pregnancies, miscarriages, birth defects, preterm birth, low birth weight, and then it can lead to breast cancer and difficulty breast and chest feeding. So, and then the report that we put out even showed that these can follow you through your life right, so you know it could lead to neurodevelopmental delays, childhood cancer, chronic illnesses, so it's kind of really scary stuff that can impact you throughout your life.

0:16:15 - Adele Scheiber

Well, and so that's a really good, I would say, like, of all the things that could go wrong because of these environmental harms, Are there things and, I admit I skim the report months ago so I apologize, but are there like a few threats that like rise to the top that we're like really worried about, Like, or is it just in general, like all of these things.

0:16:36 - Kelley Dennings

I know, it's hard right, because I live and breathe it, and it's amazing that I wake up every morning. Yeah, and it's really hard. I will say a couple of things. We work both on systems change, but I also like to say that I don't want to wake up every morning thinking I don't have free will and the ability to change my own behavior or make decisions that impact me.

0:17:01 - Adele Scheiber

Right.

0:17:02 - Kelley Dennings

So, yeah, so we work on policy, and I will say I think probably climate change is one of the biggest things right now that gets a lot of attention and media. So, one of another report that we put out was the inclusion of gender and climate plans. So, lots of municipalities right now are creating climate plans, sure, and they may mention vulnerable populations, but they very rarely mention women. So, one of the things that we're working on is to try to get municipalities to disaggregate data. Like [Adele – yes] okay, so what are the harms to women and birthing people?

We want to make sure that they're at the stakeholder table when folks are writing this. And then we really want to see gender empowerment initiatives put into these climate plans. So, are you mentioning access to family planning? Are you mentioning women in STEM, so that when we move to these renewable energy and these transitions, are women going to be left behind? So, kind of all of those things. But one particular policy that has been brought forward as part of the omnibus act [Adele - yeah, yeah, we do a lot of work on the omnibus act] Awesome. Then maybe you're familiar with the Protecting Moms and

Babies Against Climate Change Act, which was kind of like a piece of that. But it would really provide federal grant money to invest in these community-based efforts to mitigate exposure to extreme heat and other climate change risks.

0:18:47 - Adele Scheiber

Right.

0:18:48 - Kelley Dennings

And we need both plans to mitigate and adapt to climate change, right, but we're also now looking at emergency preparedness plans. So, they'll tell you to have your battery-powered radio and canned goods, but are they mentioning a reproductive health emergency preparedness kit, like, do you have condoms and tampons and a pregnancy kit? That kind of thing, right? So, again, just bringing this idea of gender and gender diverse people into gender justice and the climate work, so that's one case on the policy side.

0:19:37 - Adele Scheiber

Yeah, no, and I mean I guess like well, and we can, there's this tick-tock trend. I'm just going to say that we're like people like you, experts in the field, right, Like I am a, you know, I'm an expert and these are three things I would never do, Right, so that's kind of. I mean, this is kind of a follow-up. I'm going off script here, but you have me thinking. I'm just thinking like my audience, like if I heard all this stuff about plastic right, I actually had I'd want to know, like, if you're a pregnant or a birthing person and you just found out, and maybe you live in a place that has really high pollution, Like we had air quality warnings in Albany, New York, this summer because of the Canadian wildfires. We have never had air quality warnings here. Yeah, what are? What are some, like three major threats that I should be avoiding, that I could start avoiding or start working on tomorrow?

0:20:29 - Kelley Dennings

Okay, okay, do not microwave your plastic, [Adele - okay. Any plastic, any plastic, even microwave, safe plastic?] yeah, I will say black plastic is worse than a light-colored plastic.

0:20:46 - Adele Scheiber

Really.

0:20:46 - Kelley Dennings

Okay, I worked in waste and recycling for 15 years and when they create plastic, it's and it's black. It's probably an amalgamation of a bunch of different things and the color is kind of masking things in there.

0:21:04 - Adele Scheiber

Really, Okay.

0:21:08 - Kelley Dennings

Yes, yes. So, if you have an opaque or, or you know, a see-through piece of plastic, maybe, maybe, basically don't, but don't, really don't try to put it in glass, try to move it to a you know a ceramic plate or something and microwave that. That would be the first thing. Okay, I would say, and this is-I will preface this, all of these are a point of privilege. Not everybody can do this.

0:21:35 - Kelley Dennings

Right, right of course. So, if you can do that, microwave in glass. The other thing would be try to eat plant-based as much as possible and when you eat plant-based, try to eat organic.

0:21:49 - Adele Scheiber

I am so glad that you mentioned this, because I hear this all the time. I hear this. It's like plant-based diets are like the, the "cure all" it feels like these days, and I want to know a couple of things. What exactly do we mean when we say plant-based diet? Like? Does that mean all vegetables, right? And um, oh gosh, I forgot the other thing I was going to ask. Let's start there. Yeah, let's start there.

0:22:14 - Adele Scheiber

What do we mean by that and why is it better? Because don't they use fertilizer and all that stuff? Yeah, that was my other question.

0:22:19 - Kelley Dennings

Right, right, Okay, so well. Meat production is one of the most environmentally destructive industries on the planet. And it uses a lot of water pollution, and it creates greenhouse gas emissions. So, you are-It is one of the top 10 climate change solutions that you can do is to eat plant-based because of these emissions, right so that's number one-

0:22:40 - Adele Scheiber

and that's the extra emissions that the animals are causing, and the right. I'm trying to compare a plant-based diet to an animal-based diet because every time I talk with somebody about this, they're like, "yeah, well, you need to use water for plants too." I don't- you know what I mean. I'm trying to, like, get to that.

0:22:56 - Kelley Dennings

Well, when you plant soybeans for human consumption, that's great, but when you plant soybeans or corn to feed an animal, it's one extra layer of transportation, one more round of water that is being used, and so the other issue is this transportation right. So, we have cows in certain parts of the country and not cows in other parts of the country. So, you have to kind of move that around.

0:23:31 - Adele Scheiber

I never even thought about that. But you're right, like they don't just magically appear [laughter]

0:23:36 - Kelley Dennings

Yeah, I mean they can't live in every environment.

0:23:39 - Adele Scheiber

Sure.

0:23:40 - Kelley Dennings

And so yeah, so just you know. You could also say you want to eat lower on the food chain. So, you know there are some people that are like pescatarians, because they're not as bad, as you know, as beef. And then there is like chicken and poultry have less of an environmental impact than beef. But anyway, there is a gradation if you wanted to do that and it's a big ask, we understand that. And so, there's something called Meatless Monday and, to answer your- so we're not asking you to change writ large. Maybe you just try it once a week. [Adele - Sure, sure] And those types of meals are lentils, rice, beans. You know it can include wheat, and so it is not just vegetables and [Adele - pasta is plant-based right. For all the Italians out there.]

0:24:37 - Kelley Dennings

Pasta is plant-based, yeah, but it just kind of you get your protein from other places, Quinoa, millet, you know. Yeah, like I said, lentils.

0:26:02 - Adele Scheiber

So, we talked about Meatless Monday. We talked about don't microwave your plastic. Anything else that I could wake up tomorrow and like mitigate my risk of death than anything.

0:26:43 - Kelley Dennings

I will say so. I'm trying to hit each of our things that we talk about the plastics, the food. So, on the energy side of things, you know, we've heard about this a lot, right? So, if you do want to try to decrease your consumption of energy, which relates to the consumption of fossil fuels, you do all those things we've heard about a programmable thermostat, switching out your light bulbs to LED. If you could get into some sort of renewable energy co-op, or you can sometimes in some places choose a portion of your bill to be from renewable energy and sometimes right now you still pay a premium for it. But it's kind of market signaling that you know, "I want this" and so those are all kinds of things that folks could do personally that are really great. They really make a difference, obviously.

0:27:44 - Adele Scheiber

Well, and I know that you're a system's girly, just like we are right. So, we've talked about the personal or some things that you can do, but, as we know, this whole reduce, reuse, recycle and we'll fix the planet right this was genius marketing, right by big metal and big plastic and all that stuff. I mean it helps, but 98% of the problem is caused by these systems level and manufacturing level influencers, and so, you've kind of touched on this. But if y'all could wave a magic wand, policy-wise, you know what would be different, what would this sustainable utopia look like.

0:28:25 - Kelley Dennings

Yeah, so we've talked about how these are all interconnected, yeah, and, like I said, we really believe that making informed decisions about your health allows you to have reproductive justice, climate justice, food justice and economic justice. And so, one of these places that we haven't necessarily talked about, and it's not talked about much in either the environmental spaces that I sit or the reproductive health spaces, more so maybe in the reproductive health, is this economy side of things.

So, folks really find it difficult to see beyond our current US economic system that's so ingrained in our lives, and we really want to change that, because it is this endless growth economy that is causing the problem, whether that be in having more people or you know the consumption associated with that.

0:29:26 - Adele Scheiber

And so if you think of, you know, I just got into investing and I was asking I don't know anything about money or investing, I come from very poor and my husband is like, look, you can basically bet on the GDP to grow 7% and I'm like really, it's just going to keep. I found that bizarre. I'm like it's just going to keep going up. Like what is this? The Roman Empire? Like you know? So, is that kind of what you're getting at, Grow or perish?

0:29:49 - Kelley Dennings

Exactly. Basically, yeah, so there are different economic models that we've been looking at. There's like the well-being economy, the steady state economy, solidarity economy, you know.

0:30:03 - Adele Scheiber

Now these are. Are these communism? Because that's what everyone's going to ask you.

0:30:06 - Kelley Dennings

I know, it is not communism, and it is not socialism. So, one of the things that we've been talking about is rooting our economy in things like cooperation, democracy, pluralism and equity, and so let me say a little bit more about what that means. But we have identified this need again for financial growth, and this GDP is being prioritized over everything, right?

So, some of these alternative economic options already exist to get us to this just transition right, and so people have maybe heard of that in the energy sector, but we also need a just transition across the board. So [Adele – Sure.] Things like community supported agriculture. So, this is where you buy a share into a farm. So, you say I'm going to buy X amount of produce from you, you know this season and you share the risk associated with that.

0:31:09 - Adele Scheiber

So, it's like a co-op.

0:31:11 - Kelley Dennings

A co-op is another example. So, worker co-ops, producer co-ops, these employee-owned businesses. You know, unions.

There's really this connection with labor around that. So that's how we build people power to be able to kind of overcome all of these oppressions that we've been talking about. Another thing would be land trusts. So, you know, as you think about the economy, you generate wealth through property and that's why so many folks that were redlined or have been marginalized in the past you know there's this huge wealth gap, is because their inability over the years to own property. So, there's this idea of land trusts, community owned land.

0:31:57 - Adele Scheiber

We have one of those in Albany. Yeah, land trusts are an urban blight. Tell me what a land trust is, because I'm like I don't do, I just buy the land Like what is it? Tell me, what is it?

0:32:06 - Kelley Dennings

So, you bring together a group of people. So, I worked on this when I worked on forest conservation and so a group of people come together, and they build a trust and there is a third-party entity that manages that trust, and you essentially turn over that land to the trust in perpetuity.

0:32:28 - Adele Scheiber

Okay.

0:32:29 - Kelley Dennings

So, you give up your development rights, you give up your ability to make money off that land.

0:32:35 - Adele Scheiber

Well, how do we can trust the third-party entity though?

0:32:37 - Kelley Dennings

Well, because you hopefully set it up well and so when you set it, up you say what you can and can't do on that land.

0:32:46 - Adele Scheiber

So, it's like a contract, it's not just like you own it now.

0:32:49 - Kelley Dennings

No, no, no so when I was in forest conservation it was like, okay, you cannot sell this for a suburban development, sure, but you can cut timber and replant trees, or you can hunt, but you can't build a shopping mall.

0:33:05 - Adele Scheiber

I got you. So, what's the incentive for the trust to want to accept those terms?

0:33:10 - Kelley Dennings

So generally, you get a decrease in your taxes. So, what happens to a lot of people is in rural areas and you start to have suburban sprawl. Your property value goes up. So, we call that a lot of times your cash poor, but land rich and you just can't afford your property taxes. So, if you put it into a trust and you're a rural land loving person, you want it to stay rural. It'll decrease your property taxes.

0:33:39 - Adele Scheiber

Right, because, I guess, because everybody's sharing, is that the way where you're sharing that?

0:33:42 - Kelley Dennings

Yeah, you're sharing and it's never going to make money like it would when you sell to a strip mall, right? So, another thing I'll mention here is mutual aid, which is different than charity. But you know, an abortion fund is a prime example of a solidarity economy principle in mutual aid, and we recognize that not everybody is going to be able to afford travel in these banned states, and so that's another great example. So, I guess what we're trying to do is help folks understand that these already exist.

0:34:23 - Adele Scheiber

I was just going to say every single one of these things exists already. Yeah, like a go fund me for hospital bills is mutual aid. It's mutual aid. It's horrifying and dystopian in that we need to do that. We have to do that yeah, you're making an end run around our supposedly perfect, growing forever economy with this. But and we're, you know, we're not communists

-we're not. You know, because we hear that all the time. I feel like people have just this really poor understanding of what progressive ideas are. You know what I mean? How do you kind of combat that bad press if you were all in that dichotomous thinking and like the Facebook arguers? You know what I mean. How do you do that?

0:35:02 - Kelley Dennings

Well, it's funny because we also did a report this year all about alternative economies [Adele – Really] and people are familiar with these options but they're uncomfortable talking about it. They really are, and so that is why one of the things that we're trying to do is get the word out there about how these options already exist. You're familiar with the credit union already. Don't go to a big bank that's funding fossil fuel.

[Adele - Don't go to a big bank,] don't go to a big bank, go to your local credit union that's giving back, you know, wealth into your community or, you know, community owned solar. So, we're trying to help people understand that it's. It's not different, it's not scary, it already exists. We just need more of them.

0:35:53 - Adele Scheiber

Right, we need more of them, and I think we need more discerning and conscious consumption which, again, I know, and I am from a very, at this point, privileged background right, it can feel overwhelming, it could feel like it's a full time. I've heard somebody say to me it's like a full time job to be a good person these days, because there's just so much information out there and like, I guess, and again off script, but like, what advice do you have for somebody who feels overwhelmed by like, what do I do? Like, what do you know what I mean? Like? That's the question.

0:36:28 - Kelley Dennings

I am that person. I make trade-offs right. I totally have to make trade-offs and I will say that it is important and we're kind of coming back and forth.

It is both: it's systems chains and individual behavior. Right, so one of the things that I've worked in behavior change a long time, and I was working on individual behavior change and I got a little frustrated in that world because if I want to bike to work, I can buy a bike, I can buy a helmet, but if I don't have a safe street to bike on, if my infrastructure is not available, [Adele – right (laughter)] I'm never going to bike to work. And so, you can be as

motivated as you want, I want to buy zero waste, but I don't have a refills store, I don't have a zero-waste store. So, we need infrastructure along with individual behavior change, and I would love to just motivate people to get active on these policy changes, get in the community to try to make these small incremental changes so that we can do that. But yeah, it's tough, and for us that includes letter writing and action alerts and telling your story and letters to the editors.

0:37:47 - Adele Scheiber

Let's talk a little bit, because you do campaigns. What have you found? We struggle with this too. How do you build a movement out of busy, tired people on the wheel of capitalism? How do you do it? Like, what are some things that you've done that have helped?

0:38:07 - Kelley Dennings

You build these movements, so we work in partnership. I will say, building coalitions is so often what we do. I sit on reproductive health coalitions because I'm not the lead on that, but if we can bring our comms team to the table to help amplify that, then that's what we do, and so I really think it's just working together to support each other in these larger movements.

So, our climate team was part of that large group that had like 75,000 people show up in New York City in the fall, and it's a lot of movement building like that. But again, we have a government affairs team that's also working on policy. I mean, I know these are kind of similar, I think, to what you all do at the network, but you really need both. You need to motivate people on all levels.

0:39:03 - Adele Scheiber

Right, right, well, and that's kind of where this world is shifting. I mean, I think culture shifts so much faster these days with the internet, and so we here at the network are always trying to keep up with the latest way to communicate and all that stuff. And I do feel like the younger folks are and I'm a millennial, so I can say this, the more they want a personalized message. That is very much on point, and so I feel it's more challenging for nonprofits like

us, who maybe have limited budget, maybe limited capacity compared to big oil anyway, to kind of keep up. And so, this is just trade talk at this point.

0:39:42 - Kelley Dennings

I think for us, one of the things that we talk about that honestly runs the thread of all of this is corporate transparency. So, it's really hard. This was where I was going with my individual behavior change and my bike to work example.

0:40:01 - Adele Scheiber

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

0:40:02 - Kelley Dennings

If I want to choose organic, I need to be able to know that the product is organic. [Adele – sure] Like how was it farmed, and what are the labor practices associated with that, that is so true and there's so much like fake, there's so much like they're trying to fool you.

0:40:18 - Adele Scheiber

I feel like yeah. Cage-free. Like what does cage-free really mean, man? Yes, yes, yeah.

0:40:24 - Kelley Dennings

And the same is true with the products that we consume and what's in them, plastic, in particular, and other things. So, yeah, I think for us, a lot of what we work on is increasing corporate transparency so that people can make informed decisions.

0:40:42 - Adele Scheiber

It's like what we do, yeah, yeah, yeah, that's cool. Yeah, yeah, that's cool, yeah, no, so you believe in the people and the transparency would make it easier right, right.

0:40:53 - Kelley Dennings

How can I have bodily autonomy to choose these things if you don't have that ability? So yeah, it's all so related, yeah.

0:41:58 - Adele Scheiber

Kelley. This was amazing. Is there anything else that you want our listeners, who are mostly individual people who are exhausted all the time, to know about this topic?

0:42:30 - Kelley Dennings

Yeah, well, I just want to say one of the things that I didn't necessarily get to highlight, as much as, I want to acknowledge the disproportionate impact of pollutants to low wealth people of color and indigenous communities.

0:42:51 - Adele Scheiber

Yeah, we can talk about that. You can go on a whole thing. We have more time.

0:42:52 - Kelley Dennings

I mean they are taking the brunt of this. They live in the petrochemical corridor, where so much of the fossil fuel. [Adele – the what?] The petrochemical corridor is Cancer Alley down in Louisiana, Texas and Houston where the majority of our fossil fuel comes from, and so the extraction and production is, the harm there is exorbitant.

0:43:22 - Adele Scheiber

And so, because these communities don't have the political power to fight back?

0:43:27 - Kelley Dennings

They don't.

And if you overlay that with healthcare access. It's also low, and so they're getting it on both ends and so we really do need to support our frontline and fence line communities in this work. And we have a film and webinar series we did at the end of the year that was kind of an addendum to this report that tells a lot of these stories, and we have a lot of those community members on.

0:43:57 - Adele Scheiber

There was a really brief public consciousness moment a while-a couple of years ago about that pipeline right.

0:44:04 - Kelley Dennings

Yes.

0:44:04 - Adele Scheiber

I forget, oh God, I forget everything other than that it was pipeline on indigenous land. But I remember people really like that became like this national moment for a minute.

0:44:13 - Kelley Dennings

Sure, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, and it was going through indigenous land, kind of coming from the Canadian tar sands.

0:44:19 - Adele Scheiber

Yeah, and I think they lost. I think, despite all the, I think the pipeline went in, isn't that, right?

0:44:25 - Kelley Dennings

Yeah, and there's additional ones in Alaska.

0:44:29 - Adele Scheiber

Yeah, yeah.

0:44:30 - Kelley Dennings

Yeah it-We have a whole campaign called the climate president and the things that President Biden could do to [Adele-Interesting] to change some of this, because a lot of that is public land also and we work a lot with public lands, but that's cool.

0:44:45 - Adele Scheiber

I'm just going to link to every page on your site in the show notes. Don't worry.

0:44:51 - Kelley Dennings

So, I will say that that was one thing I wanted to mention, but then, I know that you had found our endangered species condoms.

0:44:58 - Adele Scheiber

Yes, okay, I was going to push again, but please tell me about the name.

0:45:01 - Kelley Dennings

No, no, no, it's so cool, so we have, and I don't have one with me and I guess it's a podcast anyway but anyway-

0:45:12 - Adele Scheiber

Don't worry, I'm going to put it on the website.

So cool.

0:45:13 - Kelley Dennings

So, we talk about this connection between endless growth and the decline of other species. This is well documented. So, as we've mentioned already now, it requires we fight for solutions that advance justice, equity, health and a compassionate world where both people and wildlife can thrive. But, as you know, doing this podcast, talking about sexual and reproductive health, can be challenging. So, the endangered species condoms are these perfect icebreakers. So, they have these cute illustrations with punny phrases.

0:45:47 - Adele Scheiber

I'm going to find them. Yeah, keep going.

0:45:50 - Kelley Dennings

So, one of them, for example, is wrap with care, save the polar bear. [Adele – Yes! and they're beautifully illustrated these packages] Thank you, or there's one like fumbling in the dark. Think of the monarch, yes.

0:46:04 - Adele Scheiber

Before it gets hotter, remember the sea otter.

0:46:08 - Kelley Dennings

Yes, yes, there's about 12 of them, and so we use these as an educational tool to break the ice and get people to talk about family planning. Sure, and so these are free. We distribute them to community groups, college campuses, zoos, museums, museums and science centers that have these like over 21 themed nights, you know, [Adele -right, right], so we are cognizant of where we send these and how we use them.

But, yeah, so I have a co-worker who, for a whole job, is the endangered species condoms program and working with volunteers to get these out.

0:46:46 - Adele Scheiber

I just think. I mean, when we think of campaigns and things, people, this is a creative and joyful campaign. This is using art to highlight the intersection of these two issues. I, just as a comms person and as a previous copywriter, I'm a huge fan. I'm so glad you guys won awards for it. It's amazing. Go to endangeredspeciescondoms.org y'all.

0:47:23 - Adele Scheiber

Yeah, oh, man Kelley. Well, thank you so much. I literally, I think I've learned the most on this recording Joe Rogan style than I have any other recordings.

0:47:34 - Adele Scheiber

So, thank you for your time today.

0:47:36 - Kelley Dennings

I really appreciate the opportunity to bring these worlds together. So, thank you, thank you, thank you.