

GUEST VIEWPOINT/POLLUTION

Local environmental alliance has global reach

By **JOURDAN ARENSON**
For *The Register-Guard*

With last year's Paris Climate Accord, 195 nations agreed on a plan to reduce the greenhouse gases warming our climate. It is uncertain whether the accord will lead to action. It is equally uncertain whether our actions will avoid the worst of climate change. But if the accord does lead to successful action, it will be because the world's countries finally agreed to work together to solve a common problem.

We don't often see people pulling together in the realm of intergovernmental organization. But down at the grass roots, a little-known group illustrates how a global network bound by common purpose can achieve results — and gives hope for the kind of dynamic that could grow from the Paris Accord.

The Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide, or ELAW, facilitates cross-border collaboration between attorneys and scientists in 300 partner organizations in 70 countries. Many fruitful collaborations come from fellowships that bring promising environmental advocates to ELAW headquarters in Eugene.

The office is near the University of Oregon, in a neighborhood where the biggest environmental problem is the empty beer bottles that spill out of sidewalk recycling boxes after football games. ELAW fellows come here from the world's most environmentally challenged communities.

Fellowships assume that environmentally challenged communities face similar problems: What works in one place can work in another. That was the hope of Samira Idlallene, an attorney from Marrakesh, Morocco, who recently spent a 10-day fellowship at the Eugene headquarters. Idlallene wanted help refining strategies to pro-



AMEL EMERIC/The Associated Press, 2015

Coal power plant pollution is one of the threats discussed at ELAW fellowship in Eugene.

tect marine environments from polluting ships and the impact of aquaculture on the Mediterranean coast. "We have laws with beautiful text," she said. "But in reality, nothing is ever done."

Idlallene soon learned about Diana McCaulay, an ELAW partner who faced the same problem 10 years ago in Jamaica. McCaulay successfully brought the first legal challenge to the government's rubber-stamp approval of a hotel development that threatened offshore coral reefs. That success served as precedent for future cases.

"At first there was nothing. Now, 10 years later, they have (environmental) case law in Jamaica." Idlallene asked: "What did she do? What was her process?"

Other ELAW fellows seek advice on best practices in environmental science. That was the goal of Alla Voytsikhovska during her three-month fellowship.

Voytsikhovska, an environmental scientist from Lviv, Ukraine, has been monitoring the cleanup of toxic chemicals from a landfill near Kalush in western Ukraine. After the government announced the site was clean, Voytsikhovska decided to test the area to determine possible safe uses. Her tests found concentrations of hexachlorobenzene hundreds of thousands of times above normal: The so-called cleanup was a fraud.

Voytsikhovska needed to estimate how far the contamination has gone. She worked with ELAW staff scientist Mark Cher-

naik. They calculated seepage velocity and determined that chemicals would trickle down to groundwater in five years, but hexachlorobenzene had been seeping for decades. Voytsikhovska realized her recommendations to local authorities must remediate both soil and groundwater contamination.

Beyond scientific and legal collaboration, ELAW fellows enjoy less technical interactions that foster the emotional fortitude to face environmental problems. During her three-day fellowship, Montana Duangprapa from Bangkok, Thailand, got advice on taking the long view. Duangprapa monitors the Thai government's Southern Development Plan, which calls for constructing coal power plants

and two new deep sea ports to be connected by road and railway. Duangprapa fears the plan will turn the Thai section of the Malay Peninsula "from paradise to heavy industry."

Duangprapa, one of the younger fellows at age 30, felt overwhelmed by the challenge. Advice came during a Indian buffet lunch meeting with veteran environmental lawyer and ELAW associate Charles Tebbutt.

Over vegetable curry, Tebbutt outlined how an effective lawyer influences regulatory policy: gather facts, build a record for appeal, connect through media and social networks, embarrass agencies that fail to do their jobs.

Tebbutt's talk solidified Duangprapa's commitment to advocacy work: "Protecting the world is not baby stuff. Victory takes time."

That kind of patience demands determination — and sometimes courage. Fortunately, when a global network of people display determination and courage in solving a common problem, it has the potential to generate a positive feedback loop of inspiration worldwide.

A bit of this loop appeared during the ELAW staff meeting when Voytsikhovska shared pictures of her trip to document environmental damage from an artillery battle in Eastern Ukraine. She showed a picture of herself dipping an instrument into the stagnant water at the bottom of a bomb crater and said, "I testing."

To this, ELAW Associate Director Lori Maddox said, "I have a new personal hero."

Let's hope the Paris Accord spawns a community that inspires lots more environmental heroes.

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