

**Garden Club of America
National Affairs and Legislation Conference
February 27-March 2, 2017
Washington, DC**

Report to Fort Orange Garden Club May 9, 2017
submitted by Ellen DePan and Kathy Harter



1. Introduction to NAL: (Ellen DePan)

Those who have attended the NAL Conference, can attest to the energy, knowledge and passion for conservation that is shared with and among delegates at the conference.

Kathy and I would like to present to you a summary of our experiences while at the Garden Club of America, National Affairs and Legislation Conference. It was truly one of the most inspiring, motivating and educational conferences we have attended. We both learned so much and hope you will be inspired by the information presented today. We invite you to participate in an ever growing movement of conservation in our country which has been a long time effort of the GCA.

What is NAL?

While looking at the history of the NAL, we thought it would be helpful to present some background information about it. The NAL is the Garden Club of America's , National Affairs and Legislation meeting which is held each year in Washington, DC. At the meeting, topics about conservation (i.e., Clean Air, Clean Water, Climate Change, and National Parks to mention a few,) are discussed and expert speakers present on the topics.

Who started NAL ?

From the time of its founding, the Garden Club of America has been an active force in the promotion of environmental awareness and the preservation of natural resources. In 1921, one of the four founding GCA members testified before Congress on behalf of the parks of Washington, DC. The Conservation Committee was one of the earliest GCA committees established, and many GCA members were active in the 1930s in the battle to save the redwoods. In the 1960s, as the environmental movement grew strongly in response to growing alarm about pollution and species loss in our country, the GCA's legislative involvement grew along with it. In June, 1969, the National Affairs and Legislation Committee was established as a separate entity from the Conservation Committee. In the words of Mrs. Thomas M. Waller, a primary founder and former GCA president, the purpose of NAL is to "bring to the attention of the membership important legislative proposals in Washington which fall within the fields of our endeavor." (*History of Conservation In the Garden Club of America*).

Where does it take place?

The NAL conference takes place in Washington , DC which is where it all began.

The NAL meeting takes place each year in DC to further the early efforts of the GCA founders who felt that conservation and the environment were and continue to be so important to discuss, and educate delegates as they prepare to meet with Legislators.

2. The Importance of Conservation:

"Gardening is the gateway to conservation". (GCA, *Bulletin, Winter 2017*, Dan Burkhardt).

The NAL and Conservation Committees work in tandem to enhance the GCA mission to "restore, improve, and protect the quality of the environment through educational programs and action in the fields of conservation and civic improvement." NAL follows in detail legislation that ultimately affects the above purpose, while Conservation provides education on the environmental issues themselves. Conservation Committee members work with youth, member clubs, and the general public to promote local conservation projects and responsible environmental stewardship. (*History of Conservation In the Garden Club of America*).



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Conservation committee members publish ***Conservation Watch***, a quarterly online newsletter featuring conservation and environmental news from around the country. NAL shares information with member clubs through regular legislative updates and its Current Legislative Status Chart. The focal issues for the NAL Committee are explicitly detailed in the GCA Position Papers, which are created by both committees and approved by the Executive committee.

The GCA position papers can be viewed on the GCA website and summaries of each will be handed out today as well as a list of helpful website links. There are also some very exciting projects to explore such as STEP UP which outlines many things to do every day which can help conservation.

GCA Position Paper Topics:

- Clean Air
- Clean Water
- Climate Change
- Native Plants
- National Parks
- National Public Lands
- Sustainable Agriculture, Seed Diversity, and Food Security

3. Summary of Schedule and Experiences at the NAL (Kathy Harter)

First I would like to say what a privilege it was to attend GCA's 2017 Annual National Affairs and Legislation Meeting in Washington, D.C.. I was absolutely staggered by the organization, knowledge, and passion of GCA representatives who taught and guided us through the conference. There were 300 GCA members attending the conference and we met like-minded gardeners from all over the US.

Schedule:

Beginning our NAL experience on **Monday**, Ellen and I attended an hour-long First Time Delegates Briefing Session which prepared us for our meetings with legislators. Good advice included "be confident", know the issues", "open with a thank you", and "bring it home" by relating to specific issues in our district. We then boarded a bus to the Smithsonian Greenhouse Gardens to have lunch and take a tour of their Rare Orchid Collection.

Tuesday our schedule provided a full day of speakers who recounted their efforts in support of the GCA positions on conservation issues. The speakers represented organizations that are educating people and making a real difference on the national level in their efforts to safeguard clean water, maintain national parks, mitigate climate change, protect food and farms, eliminate road sign blight, and save a rare species of dolphins.

Tuesday evening we boarded the bus to Georgetown for dinner at the beautiful home of Jackie Quillen, a friend of Region III, who also provided complimentary admission to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, which Ellen and I attended after our arrival on Sunday.

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Wednesday was our day to hear from our House Representatives and Senators. They discussed their priorities in regard to the environment and their efforts to support GCA's conservation issues as stated in our position papers. The delegates were briefed on the "Botany Bill", HR 1054, which was drafted by the Chicago Botanic Garden and GCA. Its basic tenets are to encourage the study of Botany and botanical research, and encourages the use of native plants in land management and restoration projects by the Department of Interior and the Department of Agriculture and Defense. Co-sponsored by Rep. Mike Quigley (D-IL) and Rep. Ileana Ross-Lehtinen (R-FL), the bill has been referred to a total of 13 House Committees and Subcommittees, which is where it is being considered currently. The bill's proponents are looking for co-sponsors in the House and sponsors in the Senate.

Wednesday evening we traveled to the Cosmos Club for dinner and a breathtaking video presentation by Louis Schwartzberg, Environmental Film Director and Cinematographer.

4. Summary of Meetings with Legislators (Ellen DePan and Kathy Harter)

Thursday morning was an exciting one on "The Hill". Ellen and I walked to the Rayburn Office Building for our meeting with Brendan Larkin, Senior Policy Advisor, for Congressman Paul D. Tonko. Suzanne Perry joined us for our legislative meetings. Mr. Tonko has a 97% positive rating from the League of Conservation Voters' Scorecard and has always supported environmental issues, making our meeting very pleasant as we were in agreement on the conservation issues of importance to GCA members

Ellen began the conversation by thanking Brendan for Mr. Tonko's ongoing support and also for his AQUA Bill, introduced last year and incorporated into the infrastructure bill passed last year. The intent of this bill, "Assistance, Quality, and Affordability Act of 2016", provides funding to replace aging water systems that have jeopardized drinking water in several localities. She then discussed the budget and staffing cuts proposed by the new administration for the EPA, and the importance of the Clean Air and Water Act. Ellen concluded with comments about the LWCF and its benefits to public lands in our area. Ellen gave Brendan copies of the GCA Talking Points and the LWCF benefits to NYS lands.

I started my discussion with comments about Climate Change and the challenges incurred with the current administration and mentioned support for clean energy efforts. I gave Brendan a copy of the "Botany Bill", explained its intent, and asked for Mr. Tonko's support as a co-sponsor. I also passed along a copy of the issues regarding Congress using the Congressional Review Act and how it was threatening many recent safe air and water rules.

Suzanne wrapped up our session with a more general discussion of larger environmental concerns and the most effective ways to contact our leaders and have our voices heard.

We joined the entire Region III GCA membership in the Hart and Russell Senate Office Buildings for a group picture and meetings with Senator Gillibrand's aide, Jordan Baugh, and Senator Schumer's aide, Scott Gelbman. We are fortunate that our Congressman and Senators support environmental and conservation efforts. Other GCA members had much more difficult discussions to garner their Congressional members' support.

Thank you again for giving us the opportunity to attend the GCA, NAL Conference. It was an invaluable experience for which we are very grateful.