How can grass roots people win victories in rural, conservative states? ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS, LESSONS FROM THE GRASSROOTS—a short book on grassroots victories—provides intelligent, inspiring and practical answers to that question. Although it is focused on victories in a single state (North Carolina), the strategies and tactics described in this book can work anywhere.

The book is organized into 11 chapters, 10 of them case studies of successful local fights waged against great odds by ordinary people, plus a summary called "Lessons From the Grassroots," which draws conclusions from the 10 case studies and answers the question, "What are the keys for successful organizing in a conservative state?" Here we outline some of the main points from that summary chapter, but we urge you to get and read the entire book (122 pages). Our summary omits the human stories, the rich detail, and the specific tactics that produced victories in North Carolina.

1) Select the best way to reach, educate and motivate people in your local area. Marches and rallies may not be the best way to contact people; maybe a barbecue, or a gospel sing makes more sense in your locale. And choose your words carefully... for example, people understand "conservation" because it goes back to New Deal days, but "environmental" may connote outsiders who don't understand local issues or people.

2) Connect your "environmental" issue to its broader (a) public health, (b) economic and/or (c) recreational consequences for a specific community or constituency.

"In virtually every situation we studied, the original activists were made to feel hopeless and isolated by the powers-that-be (elected officials, the media, regulatory agencies, etc.) to whom they took their problems. They were put on the defensive, ignored, or called "troublemakers" in these struggles to demonstrate that what some officials, the media, regulatory agencies, etc.) to whom they took their problems. They were put on the defensive, ignored, or called "troublemakers" in these struggles to demonstrate that what some..."

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4) Go public with the issue every way you can.

"Making the controversies highly visible and a matter of public debate. Issues were popularized and politicized by being injected into as many public arenas as possible. Each arena had to be persuaded with whatever special language it understood: politicians listen to voter power, the church to moral language and to its members, the courts to legal arguments, the media need drama, action and authority figures; a group of hunters, blacks or farmers wants to hear how the issue affects its members.

5) Use the press effectively.

The mainstream press was used to publicize the issue and to pressure decision makers to address its solution. "In general, reporters are overworked, competitive, ignorant of the issues, cautious about covering new or complex topics, and in need of human drama and conflict that is news." If possible, focus national attention on your problem; this can cause local media to pay closer attention.

6) Use your own public education channels to reach the people you want to reach: get out fact sheets; hold barbecues, picnics, auctions and concerts for fundraising but also to update and motivate people. Letter-writing campaigns to newspapers, and talk shows (both radio and TV) are effective. Videotapes of personal stories, expert testimony and events that cannot be easily duplicated, allow you to spread the word among your potential supporters.

7) The "public hearing"—whether called by the government or by citizens leading the opposition—can be (a) an effective place for organizing a mass turnout; (b) a convenient place for the media to focus on the issue; (c) an almost mandatory platform for politicians; (d) an arena where the sponsors of 'environmentally risky business' can be easily put on the defensive; (e) an education event on neutral turf that attracts interested but undecided people; (f) a chance for the environmental group to exercise its outreach, public education, media, speaking, planning and research skills.

8) Focus attention on local politicians who can in turn pressure state and federal agencies.

9) "Understandable, well-documented technical information is obviously another key to success, but many groups fail to realize that information alone will not win their fight.... It is difficult to overestimate how flexible [decision-makers] can become in interpreting or reforming existing procedures or laws when they are pressed by a massive and sustained public outcry."

10) "Direct organizing, door-to-door, person-to-person is another key ingredient in these success stories. There is no substitute for going directly to the people who are affected by an environmental problem and educating/mobilizing them.

"Very often environmental groups tend to identify a problem, research it thoroughly, attempt to publicize it through the media, and seek remedies through the appropriate government channels. They miss the most important ingredient—the human beings who can articulate how they are directly abused in a way that arouses others to sympathy and/or action."

The book talks about using the election process to advantage, and it discusses building multi-racial coalitions to strengthen the community while winning environmental fights.

This book is a sparkling jewel. Everyone who cares about the Movement for Environmental Justice could benefit by reading it.
Get: Bob Hall and others, ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS: LESSONS FROM THE GRASSROOTS (Durham, NC: Institute for Southern Studies [P.O. Box 531, Durham, NC 27702], 1988. $7.00. Phone: (919) 688-8167.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: citizen groups; citizen activism; strategies; tactics; elections; coalitions; radioactive waste; citizen success stories; incineration; landfilling; pcbs; wetlands; nc; shellfish;