

“GUESS I DON’T HAVE ANY CUTE JOKES ABOUT climate change,” says Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, founder and CEO of nonprofit conservation consulting group Ocean Collectiv. “Some off-the-cuff dark-humor moments, for sure.”

Point taken. Comedy doesn’t exactly flow out of the topic. In our conversation, she describes major cities woefully unprepared for a sea-level rise of six feet or more, with storm surges on top of that; hundreds of millions of climate refugees; and the possible extinction of the entire global coral reef ecosystem.

Still, an opportunity for levity isn’t one a vibrant conversationalist like Dr. Johnson can easily pass up.

“I am actually working on a TED Talk and there are some jokes in there,” she says. “One of them: Speaking as both a marine biologist and a single person, I can tell you, there actually aren’t that many fish in the sea.”

Not yet 40, Dr. Johnson is much more than a marine biologist. Formerly executive director of the Waitt Institute, she co-founded and led the fast-growing Blue Halo Initiative. Launched in the Caribbean, Blue Halo coordinates expertise in coastal societies to create sustainable ocean practices, simultaneously supporting at-risk coastal ecologies and local economies. In Barbuda, Blue Halo’s years of research and public discussions ultimately resulted in ocean management regulations that were signed into law in 2017. The program has expanded

Making

WAVES

to Curaçao and Montserrat, with other partnerships as remote as Vava’u in the Pacific.

In 2017, she founded Ocean Collectiv, whose experts advise foundations, nonprofits and corporations on ocean conservation and the implications for social justice. More recently she launched the Urban Ocean Lab, a think tank for the problems facing coastal cities.

Along the way, Dr. Johnson has become one of the leading public voices on climate change and environment issues, joining and supporting a cadre of scientists who together are redirecting the field toward the twin lights of conservation and social justice. And she is helping to train the next generation, through mentoring and courses she teaches at New York University.

Yet she remains a marine biologist at heart—one who likes to “geek out” on Twitter over reports of newly uncovered fish fossils and octopus trivia. She spoke to us about the responsibilities of business in the face of the world’s climate crisis and the many other threats to ocean resources.

Scientist, ocean conservationist and social entrepreneur **DR. AYANA ELIZABETH JOHNSON** tells Brunswick’s **PRESTON GOLSON** and **LIZ DAHAN** about corporate action and transparency needed in the climate crisis.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson dives in the seagrass-lined waters of Jamaica’s coast in 2018. Her love of ocean study began with a visit to Key West in Florida as a child, where she learned to swim and viewed the life of the coral reef from a glass-bottom boat.



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY DR. AYANA ELIZABETH JOHNSON

How do you prioritize the many challenges facing the planet’s oceans?

In a way, it’s a bit of a red herring. Should we fight climate change? Or should we care about biodiversity? Or should we care about habitats? Or should we care about food security? They’re all interconnected. I just look at where I can be most useful.

We’re in this crazy time where it has to be all of the above and all hands on deck. From a business perspective, thinking of solutions as having some specific competitive advantage is the wrong approach. It should be more like, what unique skills or assets does a company have that can contribute to solutions? Whether that is platform, or market share, or shifting corporate practices, or influencing policy.

Do you have a favorite example to introduce people to the topic of ocean conservation?

I grew up in Brooklyn. It took being gone for 18 years, getting a Ph.D., working in the Caribbean for a decade and then moving back to Brooklyn for me to realize that New York City is actually an archipelago.

“FROM A BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE, THINKING OF SOLUTIONS AS HAVING SOME SPECIFIC COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IS THE WRONG APPROACH.”

The East River is just a waterway that connects Long Island sound and the harbor. It’s not even a river.

We have over 500 miles of coastline in New York City. There are people who still haven’t recovered from Hurricane Sandy [which devastated a wide swath of the US East Coast in 2012]. We have sea-horses that live in the lower Hudson River. And there are whales in New York Harbor—you can actually go whale watching in New York Harbor. It is still a living estuary system that’s worth protecting.

How do you talk about climate change to politicians or audiences who do not believe the environment is in danger?

Conversations about what’s true scientifically are often a diversionary tactic or disingenuous. If someone has a question about how the science actually works, I’m obviously happy to answer that. I’m entirely focused on solutions, not debating whether we have a problem.

The good news is that finally, the majority of Americans understand that climate change is

happening. There will be people who until the bitter end are like, “We’re not causing it. There’s nothing we can do. It’s too expensive and it’s too inconvenient.” I can’t spend all my time arguing about the realities of the really dangerous world we’re creating.

Individuals and individual business leaders often despair of being able to make a difference. How do you combat that?

The secret there is asking yourself, what are you good at? Whatever it is, do that in the service of solving environmental problems. Some people are really good at art, or music, or debate and changing people’s minds, or influencing politicians, or throwing dinner parties and getting people around the table to really talk through stuff. Don’t try to invent a new skill necessarily. If you’re great at making websites, we need this movement to look better too.

On the business side, the same thing: What are you good at? And then, the second layer is telling the story of how and why. For a corporation to go carbon neutral is really hard, so it’s important to say why you’re doing it and, perhaps more importantly, how you did it. Then you’ll have a much larger impact. That’s the part I’m really excited about. Leveraging your specific skills and strengths but then also telling the story in a way that’s useful for others.

Do you see individuals being given false choices? One study recently examined the amount of energy needed to produce reusable bags that have become popular, for instance.

This idea that we need to buy new stuff to be more environmentally responsible is another sort of red herring. We already have everything we need. Basically, every piece of plastic that we’ve ever created still exists on this planet. And only about 9 percent is recycled. That’s insane. A literal metric ton of plastic goes into the ocean every four seconds globally. This is an addiction of our species that’s totally out of control.

I refuse swag at all these events now. I don’t need another water bottle. I don’t need another tote bag.

You founded Ocean Collectiv as a result of your experience with the Blue Halo Initiative. Can you talk about that, and what inspiration you took from it?

I’ve always known that ocean conservation was a complicated problem and inherently multidisciplinary. That’s actually what drew me to the field; it wasn’t just my obsession with octopuses, although there’s that as well. But—

IN 2018, ONLY
9
PERCENT OF
EXPERTS
DISCUSSING
CLIMATE CHANGE
ON TV NEWS
SHOWS WERE
PEOPLE OF
COLOR, AND ONLY
19 PERCENT
WERE WOMEN.

SOURCE: MEDIA MATTERS

Wait—your obsession with octopuses?

Oh, they’re very cool. They have three hearts. They can think independently with each arm. Octopuses are amazing.

But I care a lot more about coastal communities and people whose food security and livelihoods and cultures depend on the sea. Sustainability in that context is not just the ecology, but also the economics, the sociopolitical and cultural context.

The Blue Halo Initiative really looks at the challenge of sustainable ocean management holistically. It works with local fishermen and fisheries managers, park rangers, tourism operators, local governments, legal advisors, a science team, a GIS mapping team and some communications support—really just figuring out all the skills we need at the table to protect and restore their ocean resources for generations to come.

That’s what I carried to Ocean Collectiv, which is a consulting firm for ocean conservation solutions grounded in social justice. I asked all these amazing people I know in ocean conservation who were independent or freelance if they wanted to join an umbrella organization where we could collaborate on a project basis to support nonprofits, foundations and companies trying to do better—to help with strategy, research, communication and policy.

The spectrum of projects that we’ve worked on has been really broad. From understanding how to reduce waste along the seafood supply chain, to doing a really rigorous assessment of plastics in the ocean. One arts foundation has a marine lab in Jamaica, an art space in Venice and a yacht taking scientists and artists to remote locations—all this really cool stuff. How can they leverage all that to start to shift policy and create political and cultural change? It’s really been a gift to get to work on such a fascinating portfolio of approaches.

The organization is still young, but are there accomplishments you can point to?

We worked with the Bezos Family Foundation designing and managing a small grants program—this is Jeff’s parents’ foundation, Mike and Jackie. They focus on education and this year their theme is the ocean. We identified and vetted small local conservation groups all over the world doing ocean conservation and education with a social justice element. From teaching black kids to swim in South Africa to mounting a festival in Peru with fishing villages, to the Billion Oyster Project and their annual science fair here in New York City. And the list goes on. They’re just really impressive groups. Anything I

can do to support what’s happening at the local level, I’m always honored to do that.

The number of female voices in climate science has grown—yourself, Katharine Hayhoe and Katharine Wilkinson, for instance. Is that true in climate science generally?

That’s funny. I was emailing with both of those women ahead of this interview. We’re on the same email thread. Yes, that is accurate: There are a lot of phenomenally brilliant and shockingly funny women working on climate solutions. It’s really impressive. Obviously, there are a lot of male voices there as well. But yes, I’m really pleased that women are prominent in this space. They’re doing good work. And they’re fun to hang out with. They are also super-effective and deserve way more support for the critically important work they’re doing.

Does that shift bring a change of perspective?

Yes. You have to remember, the science is objective—you’re measuring heat in the atmosphere, for instance. But when it comes down more specifically to what is studied, that’s very much the decision of the scientist. I was interested in sustainable management of fishing on Caribbean coral reefs because I care about Caribbean cultures and communities—my dad was Jamaican. More women in the space are concerned about how climate change is impacting women, for example. Women are disproportionately impacted by the effects of climate change. That research is happening because women are leading it.

People with different lives and experiences will ask different questions. If you have a panel full of white men, you just don’t have all the ideas in the room. It’s not about feminism and equality. It’s more, do we want to solve this crazy problem or not? If we do, we’re going to need a lot more brain power coming at these challenges from all angles.

Social media allows more women to build their own platforms. Yet women are not the ones asked to be on TV to talk about their work and share their insights. That is still overwhelmingly white men. There was a study by Media Matters: In 2018, it was 91 percent white people and 9 percent people of color who were on the news to talk about climate change. Only 19 percent were women.

There is also this really wonderful solidarity between these women. The fact that I actually know Katharine Wilkinson and Katharine Hayhoe and Kate Marvel from NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies and Rhiana Gunn-Wright who’s the policy lead on the Green New Deal, and all of these

“WE NEED CORPORATE LEADERS TO MAKE FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES IN THE WAY THAT THEY DO BUSINESS.”



PRESTON GOLSON is a Director with Brunswick and a former CIA analyst and spokesperson. **LIZ DAHAN** is a Director with the firm’s Business & Society practice. Both are based in the Washington, DC office.

women—it’s not an accident. We’re all supporting each other, trying to help each other be successful because that’s what the world needs. Not more competition, but more collaboration.

What would you like business leaders to take away from this interview?

We’re operating in the context of a climate crisis. Even though it sounds like just a few degrees, it’s as if a human were running a fever—the difference between 101° and 104° is life and death. The number of projected climate refugees from Bangladesh alone is approaching tens of millions. We can’t just tinker around with the edges of this problem.

We need corporate leaders to make fundamental changes in the way that they do business. I would encourage them to be bold and visionary, to explain why they’re doing what they’re doing, and to reach out to scientists. I’m not always convinced that the science is getting in there the way it needs to. There aren’t a lot of science advisors in a lot of these companies. Every scientist I know would be happy to talk to someone who’s trying to make a big decision about how to shift their practices toward sustainability.

Think about how business leaders can get together. This is starting to happen on plastics with a NextWave roundtable coordinated by Lonely Whale, bringing together Dell, HP, GM, Ikea, Herman Miller—all these companies from all these different sectors, all thinking about how to shift their supply chains away from virgin plastic. Fashion is one of the most polluting industries on the planet. How do we change that? What are we going to do about the automobile industry? Talk and figure it out together.

The challenge of the competitive market is that there’s no incentive for doing that—except to maintain a planet that’s suitable for the life that we currently have on it. Coral reefs will be gone within 20 to 30 years unless something dramatic shifts—an entire ecosystem erased from the planet that a billion people depend on for their livelihoods and nutrition, just gone.

So that’s where we’re at. And I just really hope that people start to do their homework and think super big about how they can be a part of the massive structural changes that are going to be needed to get to where we need to be. And not buy land in New Zealand so they can hunker down in the apocalypse by themselves. Like, that’s really irresponsible. Maybe less effort going to other planets and more effort fixing this one. ♦