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Eric Utne: It's now easy being green, and yet ...

By **ERIC UTNE**

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It used to be that the economy and the environment competed for attention and resources. If you invested your time and energy to address poverty, social justice, urban crime and other social issues, you probably weren't also involved in saving the spotted owl or advocating for solar power and wind energy. It was jobs vs. the environment.

But that was then and this is now. We've embarked on a new era in which we are called to address a floundering economy, global climate change, foreign wars and international terrorism, racial injustice, species extinction, decaying infrastructure and other challenges, all at the same time. Impossible?

Not according to Van Jones, author of the new book "The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems."

Jones is a graduate of Yale, the founder and president of Green for All (www.greenforall.org), a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and cofounder of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. In addition, he is a board member of 1Sky (www.1Sky.org) and of the Apollo Alliance and is a fellow with the Institute of Noetic Sciences.

In other words, he has both street cred and an Ivy League résumé. He can speak with authority to community organizers, business leaders, legislators and tree-huggers alike. Recently he has been advising the Obama transition team as it develops a green economic stimulus package.

Jones says that the best solution for our economic and environmental ills is to create thousands, even millions, of clean "green" jobs, putting unemployed inner-city youth and others to work insulating homes, cleaning up polluted wetlands and toxic urban sites, rebuilding crumbling highways and bridges, manufacturing wind turbines, installing solar panels and the like.

Although most legislators now agree with Jones' premise, a pernicious backlash has recently formed to undermine the movement for green-collar jobs and a clean-energy future. Detractors are trying to divert and derail the green movement. As Jones writes, "Call it the rise of the 'dirty greens.' They say the right words, but their environmental commitment is no deeper than the green sheen on an oil slick."

Perhaps the most underhanded opponents are those advocating so-called "clean coal," oil shale and tar sand development, nuclear power and other dangerous and dirty technologies, saying America needs to do whatever it takes to lower energy prices. They've even created a backlash alliance featuring African-Americans holding signs saying: "Environmental Groups Don't Feed My Family" and "Food or Fuel? Don't Make Me Choose."

Even Barack Obama and Joe Biden spoke approvingly of "clean coal" during the presidential campaign. But a growing consensus of scientists agrees that coal is the dirtiest fuel there is and belongs only to the past. Much-higher emission cuts can be made using currently available natural gas, wind and modern biomass technologies. Work still needs to be done to convince the new administration that green solutions are viable.

Maybe we have 10 years to turn things around -- if we invest wisely now.

Eric Utne, founder of the Utne Reader magazine, is a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota's Center for Spirituality & Healing. Van Jones will be speaking on "the social and environmental dimensions of health and healing" on March 5 at the university's Ted Mann Concert Hall.

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