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WORLDCHANGING

## Worldchanging Interview: Bill McKibben

[Sarah Kuck](#)

June 11, 2009 4:46 PM

### World renowned activist Bill McKibben on moral mathematics, motivation and the future of the climate change movement

*Bill McKibben has been writing and teaching about the environment and climate change for more than 20 years. During that time, he has seen the environmental movement evolve and change to include numerous other issues, from social justice to health care. I recently met up with McKibben to discuss the state of the movement and his latest project, [350.org](#). McKibben started the international campaign to make [350 ppm](#) – the safe upper limit for atmospheric carbon – a household term, and to inspire the world to rise to the challenge of the climate crisis.*

*Our current level of CO2 saturation is [385 ppm and climbing](#). Bringing it down to 350 will be no small task, personally or politically, but [it is absolutely essential](#) if we want to stabilize the climate. McKibben has said that 'the difference between 550 ppm and 350 ppm is that the weaning off of fossil fuel has to happen now, and everywhere.' To achieve this, world leaders have to move away from voluntary measures and put serious climate regulating legislation in place. McKibben believes that engaged citizens will be the crucial lever that will make this happen, if they take the right actions.*

**Sarah Kuck:** In your opinion, what would a scientifically realistic climate bill look like?

**Bill McKibben:** Well there's no mystery to it, we need to make deeper cuts all the time. We have to radically change in very few years the way that the energy system in [the United States] works. That includes [pricing carbon](#), it includes money for research into technologies, it includes everything that we can throw at it. This is the only real job that we've got right now.

The science is so far past where the politics are that whatever bill we pass has to have extensive provisions for changing rapidly, of being ramped up rapidly as the science demands it. And that kind of scientific review is probably one of the most important parts of any good climate legislation.

**SK:** Let's say the United States fails to pass carbon regulating legislation before the [Conference of Parties](#) (COP15) in



**Copenhagen this winter. Would that impact the outcome of the conference?**

**BM:** We're reaching a point where everyone in the world understands the seriousness of the issue we are dealing with, and if for some inconceivable reason the US refuses to play any kind of leadership role, then someone else is going to have to. It's one of the reasons that we are organizing globally: to put real pressure from every direction on every direction, and to give those leaders who are willing to do the right thing some space in which to do it.

Barack Obama is a big help, but he can't single handedly do this, not without a lot of backup from citizens changing the political conversation.

Everything that we don't do *now* is a terrible thing. The time we have is extremely short. We have to try to make every possible change happen that we can. An extremely weak bill out of Congress – if it gets watered down a lot – will be troublesome too, because that will announce what the acceptable level of commitment is for various countries. If the acceptable level of commitment is so low that it doesn't get the job done, then we're in big trouble, which is why we are pushing this [350](#) number so hard. We need to have a target that allows us to do something more than just claim, 'yes, we've adopted climate legislation. Yes, we've reached a global climate agreement.' That's good, but it's got to be something that actually gets the job done. And in this case the job is now defined by a number: [350](#).

**SK: What does a 350 lifestyle look like?**

**BM:** There are a couple of answers. One is, we don't know. There's lots of technology and innovation and entrepreneurship that will come at us if we get policy and pricing right. Which is good news. It means there are some possibilities.

But one of the things it will look like is less homogeneous, and more local, than the world we live in now. People will be doing things that make sense where they are instead of using cheap fossil fuel to export exactly the same idea of everything all over the planet. .

**SK: What do we need to do from the top-down to ensure that we reach 350?**

**BM:** The most important thing is to get a strong science-based [cap](#) on carbon, nationally and internationally. To make that happen internationally, the thing that's going to be absolutely hardest -- and there are many, many hard things and many hard forces to overcome, including the extreme vested interests around fossil fuel -- but the hardest thing that really has to happen more than anything else is an agreement between the rich world and the poor world. Especially between [America and China](#). We must find some way to convince the developing world not to burn the big piles of coal they have lying around. They are open to convincing because they are in trouble from climate change, but it won't be for free. Just saying, 'we filled up the atmosphere, you figure out some other way to power your lives,' [is not moral](#), it's not just, and it's not practical.

**SK: You use the phrase moral mathematics to describe this. Can you explain what you mean by this?**

**BM:** I saw all these people dying from dengue [(which many health officials claim [is re-emerging due to climate change](#))] and I understood that if the United States was producing 25 percent of the world's carbon, then we are responsible for a quarter of the damage that it does, at some level. It's not obviously straightforward biology or epidemiology, but it works. It's close enough.

**SK: What are the bottom-up actions we can take?**

**BM:** The bottom up thing we can do is get politically engaged. We can't solve this thing by addition. It has to be by multiplication. That's an inherently political process. I don't mean partisan -- it involves putting pressure on the system to make the system change.

We have to do things that make strategic sense. Having a big rally against global warming doesn't get you anywhere because at this point everybody is against global warming. The art is that you have to do it in such a way that what you are asking for has some kind of impact on the scale of it. So that's why we are so fixated on [350](#) because the target itself defines the action that we need to take.

**SK: To be someone who is coming to grips with climate change can be a scary thing. How do you, as an organizer, strike a balance between fear and motivation when educating people about the effects of climate change? What tools are**

### helping you deliver these messages?

**BM:** Well, it's kind of scary even if you've been doing it for 20 years. I wish I could tell you it is going to get less scary. People need to understand the depth of the crisis, or the answers that they pick, while well intentioned, won't rise to [the scale that we need](#).

It doesn't do anybody any good to paint a picture of the situation in which going out and changing your light bulbs seems like a really useful response. It's a useful thing to do, but it clearly can't be a major part of your response to this thing or we're not going to get anywhere. On the other hand, you can't paint a picture of it so paralyzing that nobody can do anything -- although that day may come.

The tool that's helping the most is the Internet. It wouldn't have been possible to even think about real global organizing 20 years ago, five years ago really. And it *is* possible now. But it can't be confined to things that happen on the web. I think that the web is integral, but you can't just not sit around and [send people email petitions](#). The real world remains important in the outcome of all of this.

We love the web because of the connectivity. It allows us to do [dispersed actions](#) and have them add up to more than the sum of their parts. You don't need to do a march on Washington. We can do political action in thousands of places at once and make it very real. That means we can do it cheaply and that means we can do it without having people drive all over, fly all over the world burning fossil fuel.

### SK: Where does 350.org fit into the global climate movement?

**BM:** [The movement] is broader and more diverse than it has been, but it's still nowhere near big enough. The environmental movement that we had five, 10 years ago was scaled to fight much smaller battles than this one. It was scaled to protect national parks or save particular endangered species -- not scaled to take on the most fundamental part of our economy. We shouldn't make the mistake of thinking we have a movement large enough to do what needs to be done. We have to do a lot of organizing.

And that's what [350](#) is all about. It's a real attempt to reach people who have never been involved with this before. For example, we're doing lots of work with churches and lots of work in the developing world. That's where I'm happiest with our progress so far -- in India and in parts of Africa, Indonesia and Malaysia.

And we're doing lots of work with young people. The environmental movement, as Americans think about it, had become very grey, and had aged quite significantly. It was still largely composed of people who came of age during the first [Earth Day](#). We have to change that, and we are. It's really exciting to see youth climate networks, not just in the United States where they are very strong, but also around the world.

### SK: What are 350.org's plans for the future?

**BM:** The main goal at the moment is to make [October 24, 2009](#), the biggest day of global grassroots action that there's ever been. Three weeks ago we opened the website for registration and there are now over 1,000 actions signed up and ready to go. There will be several multiples of that by October and it will be very beautiful. We have to figure out how to make that politically powerful, and we will.

Our structure is that we are not an organization. We are a campaign. The reason for that is to make it very porous. It's open source organizing, which is a relatively new idea (link to Step It Up). Our hope is that everybody grabs a hold of it and brands it with their own logos and does their own thing with it. The globe is too big for any one organization to actually organize. In essence we are throwing a huge potluck supper and saying here's the date and here's the theme, now you guys cook. We'll try to coordinate just enough to make sure not everybody brings dessert. But that's about the degree to which we can centrally coordinate it. And we will make sure that the results of this big meal are seen around the world. That part we can do.

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### COMMENTS

I think a big factor in reducing to 350 has to be population control, and it's an issue very few people are willing to discuss. The only long term solution is to reduce the population of the planet drastically. If every woman on the planet, starting now, had only

1 child per woman, we could reduce the population to less than 4 billion by 2075, which would help tremendously.

I'd like to see population reduction become a serious discussion point in climate change. We cannot seriously address this issue without taking on population control.

Thank you for a great article.

Elisabeth

Posted by: Elisabeth Robson on June 12, 2009 9:17 AM

Ive been putting up fliers in lower westchester that read 350.org the planet you help save may be your own. the 350 idea is great because its pure grass roots. Im going to buy 1000 business cards that say the same as above and put them on cars in parking lots. Im putting them under doors in my coop. Ive changed my answering machine message. it says 350.org the planet you save may be your own. I have a meeting with the mayor of my town Mt Vernon NY in July. Ill tell him about 350.org and encourage him to lead a parade in Mt Vernon. as I ride my 24 speed bike around the area Ill put up more flyers. Ive called my local radio station and Ive talked about 350. Ive talked to my friend pauline Smith who I met through Howard Dean Meet Ups about 350. She knows alot of people. I have a 350.org sign on the back of my car and on the back of my bike. 350 gives me something tangible to do. Ive e mailed family members. There is a consiousness shift and I want to be part of it.

Posted by: jon nardelli on June 14, 2009 9:01 AM

We are beginning to understand what a 350 lifestyle is on a neighborhood scale. A "truly sustainable" carbon footprint is being modeled at Sonoma Mountain Village, a proposed redevelopment in California for some 4500 residents.

We're finding that technology will only get us so far. Roughly 70% of the household carbon footprint is wrapped up in consumption choices: transportation, food, waste, goods, and services.

The bottom line is that technology is not the biggest fix: culture change is, and it's a tricky challenge.

Posted by: [Greg Searle](#) on June 14, 2009 1:42 PM

Strange: Bill McKibben doesn't seem to understand his own aim. 350ppm means that we **\*\*actively withdraw CO2 from the atmosphere\*\***.

It means we have to go carbon-negative. And neither solar power nor wind power nor any other renewable energy technology (except one) actively withdraws existing carbon from the air.

So either McKibben doesn't know what he's talking about. Or else his goal is to promote geo-engineering techniques which reduce atmospheric carbon, or he's promoting only biochar (the only carbon-negative energy technology).

All other interventions are not the core business of people who want 350ppm.

If we were to stop using all coal, gas and oil consumption all at once right now, we would become carbon-neutral and we would be stuck at 387ppm in the atmosphere. But to get to 350ppm, you need something entirely different.

Strange, strange, strange.

Perhaps the name 350 is just badly chosen. (I know it derives from Hansen's paper. But people who've read that paper know what it gets to 350ppm. It requires biochar and reforestation.)

Posted by: Congolia on June 15, 2009 12:09 PM

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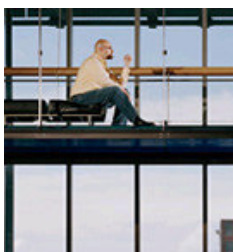
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