

guardian.co.uk

ENVIRONMENT BLOG



350 – the most important number on the planet. We just need to get the politicians to listen to the scientists

All over the world thousands will be joining the 350 rallying cry: from the Great Barrier Reef to the slopes of Mount Everest



Author Bill McKibben is a writer, activist, and co-founder of 350.org. A scholar-in-residence at Middlebury College, McKibben is the author of *The End of Nature*, the first book for a general audience on climate change. Photograph: PR/Nancie Battaglia

Sometimes people say: "If only we could get the world to come together to do such and such." And it sounds so silly and trite and obviously impossible. But today I'm sitting in an office in lower Manhattan, surrounded by a bunch of 24-year-olds hunched over laptops, amid small towers of empty pizza boxes. And around us, somehow, at least for a day, the world actually is coming together.

Tomorrow marks the day of global action we've been planning at 350.org for 18 months, and in the last few weeks it's gone ferociously viral — swine flu viral, bouncing around the world at a dizzying pace. There will be more than 4,600 actions and rallies and demonstrations today in 170 countries, making it the most widespread day of political

In lots of big cities, for instance, thousands of citizens will form giant 3s with their bodies, and in others (including London) giant 5s, and in others giant 0s. It's a kind of planet-scale Scrabble — it'll take the BBC and CNN and the rest to solve the puzzle, to make the point that you have to work across borders to solve these problems. There are Olympic champions leading 350 people on bike rides, and thousands of churches ringing their bells 350 times. It's happening everywhere — 300 big rallies in China alone, which is not a place where political organising usually takes place. 150 across India. More than a thousand across the US, the heart of the problem.

Global movements are rare things — to work across linguistic boundaries, and the enormous divide between rich and poor, is extremely difficult. One of the last such moments came when the whole planet turned its focus on South Africa. Which is why it was so sweet to wake up yesterday morning and open the newspaper to read [an op-ed from Desmond Tutu](#), hero of that struggle, calling 350 "the same kind of coalition that helped make the word "apartheid" known around the world." In the South African struggle, he continued, "we showed that if we act on the side of justice, we have the power to turn tides. Worldwide, we have a chance to start turning the tide of [climate change](#) with just such a concerted effort today."

It won't be in any sense simple, of course. Rapidly getting the world off fossil fuel is the most difficult task we've ever undertaken as a planet. The current plans for the [Copenhagen treaty](#) are mediocre at best, and every day we hear some world leader trying to lower expectations that anything will happen. And no one — especially the US Congress — has even begun to talk about spending the kind of money the developing world needs to adapt to the changes already coming at them. You could despair.

But one of the missing ingredients in this fight has always been a popular movement. Leaving it to experts alone did not do the trick — there was no real counterpressure to the power of vested interests and inertia. Now that's starting to change. As I'm typing this, amazing images of demonstrations have come in from Yemen and Tel Aviv, from Ohio and from Bangladesh, from the highest mountain in Montenegro and from the floor of the New Zealand parliament.

I wrote the [first book](#) for a general audience on climate change 20 years ago this autumn, and for those two decades I'd wondered what the global warming movement would look like when it finally materialised. It's a little hard to tell because my eyes mist up at the torrent of images, and at the thought of people everywhere — in Kabul, in Iraq, in Honduras — putting their faith in basic science and basic democracy. I know exactly what it feels like, though. It feels like the planet's immune system has begun to kick in, and that the antibodies represented by conscious citizens are beginning to go to work. Let's hope we haven't waited too long to get started.

Bill McKibben is the coordinator of [350.org](#)

[Previous](#)

[Blog home](#)

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2009