

PUSHING THE POLITICAL SYSTEM FOR CHANGE:

An Interview with Bill McKibben

James Boyd



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Boyd: *Where did you find your passion for the natural world?*

McKibben: My father was a great outdoorsman, who had been brought up in the shadow of Mount Rainier. I didn't grow up there, but we'd spend every summer hiking. Nevertheless I became a fairly urban person, not focused on environmental issues; in the 1980s, I worked at the *New Yorker*, writing "Talk of the Town" articles.

And then, through a series of accidents, I ended up living in the Adirondacks. It's the last great wilderness of the Northeast, and it immedi-

James Boyd is a senior fellow at RFF. His research interests include water quality regulation and the impact of land use policy on water resources management.

ately got under my skin. That was where I began to think about what scientists were beginning to say about climate change.

There are a thousand practical reasons to be worried about global warming, but here's a personal reason. My absolute favorite part of the year is winter. I love winter, everything about it. And if the scientists are correct about the magnitude of warming we can expect—and every indication is that they are—winter won't exist in the Adirondacks by the middle of this century. And I desperately want my daughter and her daughter to be able to enjoy winter.

Boyd: *The growth of large urban and semi-urban areas, particularly on the nation's coasts, means that*

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Americans are living in denser, more-developed environments. Does our growing isolation from the natural world make us hungrier for the experience of nature?

McKibben: I hope so. I worry that kids are growing up with no natural experiences at all. It's amazing that so many people are scared of nature—truly, viscerally frightened of the out-of-doors. The same people who think bears are about to jump out think nothing of doing really dangerous things, like driving around the suburbs.

I think we're failing to recognize what constitutes the real world, now that people are immersed all day in the stream of images coming from computers. It becomes difficult to maintain significant human contact when you're interacting mostly with a computer screen.

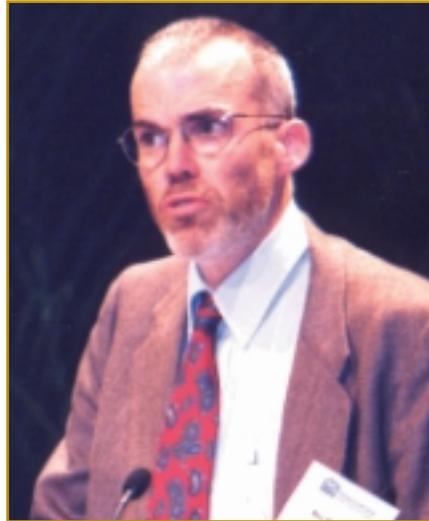
Boyd: *Does less human contact make it more difficult to motivate and engage people on environmental issues like climate change?*

McKibben: I find that people are well aware that the climate is changing. They've noticed that there are longer and worse heat waves. They've noticed that winter is not what it used to be, that mud season lasts longer on either side. And people are beginning to focus on the increasingly disturbing images from the rest of the world. Every time one of those state-sized chunks drops off an ice shelf, for a few days people are

asking, "Is something going on here?"

Boyd: *Since it is rooted in the social sciences, the RFF approach to environmental problems could be labeled*

"pragmatic" as opposed to "idealistic." You seem to represent a more idealistic side of the environmental movement. Are you comfortable with that characterization?



Bill McKibben, author, *The End of Nature*, also participated in a panel on 21st century environmentalism with Utah Governor Michael Leavitt.

McKibben: I used to be, but I'm now the most basic kind of realist. The amount of carbon in the atmosphere is going up, and we've got to do something about it. What's idealistic is to maintain that it's not a deep problem, that it will solve itself, or that there's a set of easy policies. That's the fantasy world.

The realist acknowledges that arctic ice is 40% thinner than it was four years ago and there's this big problem with fresh water. There are now measurable salinity differences in the North Atlantic. Let's be realistic about it. Let's not engage in any idealism of any kind.

The romantic imagines that we'll work out the perfect system for dealing with it, and until we do, we shouldn't do anything. Or that we won't need to deal with it because the Second Coming is at hand.

There's a whole range of avoidance options, but the most egregious is we don't want to deal with it because it's painful and it's going to hurt the economy, so we're going to stick our fingers in our ears and hope it goes away. Frankly, that's an immature method of dealing with reality.

Boyd: *How do you explain the stronger political response to climate change concerns in Europe? Are we simply less environmentally inclined, does our environmental movement have a credibility problem that it doesn't have in Europe?*

McKibben: It's twice as difficult to address global warming in this country because we're twice as addicted to cheap energy as the Europeans—we use twice as much. Combine that with a political system that allows the rich tremendous undue influence and doesn't have the European mechanism for giving some influence to minorities.

That said, this country invented environmentalism—the whole idea, not to mention most of the science and the economics of it. We've led the way and been the standard bearer. But now, on the most important issues, we're not only trailing but actually disrupting everybody else's progress by undermining confidence in the science. That's a tremendous embarrassment, and a sign that something has gone wrong.

Boyd: *Is it possible that other countries just talk a better game?*

McKibben: Not on climate change. Our CO₂ emissions are going steadily up. In some countries in Europe, carbon emissions are holding steady or even going down a little. When I travel, I find that our stance on energy brings us disrepute. People can understand that we're a weird country in a lot of ways—they can deal with that. They like us. But they can't understand our approach to the environment.

Boyd: *In your writing you emphasize the importance of local action to address environmental issues. But not everyone in the environmental movement is comfortable with leaving environmental decisions to localities. What are your thoughts about the environmental federalism debate?*

McKibben: It should depend on the problem. Climate change is really better addressed at the federal level. Given that that's not happening, then we've got no choice but to hope that California can lead the way. The trouble is that it's very hard to catalyze the level of investment needed to make significant jumps along this energy transition on anything less than the regional level.

For water quality and some other environmental issues, I'm mostly comfortable with setting a national standard and letting people decide how they're going to meet it locally. One of the great revelations of the past 25 years is that that approach really can work—people can do it.

Climate change is uniquely hard to solve at the state and local levels, where there are countervailing economic and political pressures. If I focus on climate change, it's because this is the one environmental issue that can make all the others moot.

And solving it will win us bonus points in other areas. For example, one solution involves better transit options, and the benefits of that will extend beyond climate change. Different kinds of energy generation—wind or sun or whatever—will also bring changes in the scale and control of our infrastructure. We would be a very different country if every neighborhood had its own windmill or solar power. One hopes that this could become a virtuous circle. But getting it

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going, getting rid of the first 10% of carbon emissions—that’s the tough part. I think after a certain point it’s going to gallop along. Once people see that other people have windmills and get free power, they’re going to say, “Give me one, too.”

Boyd: *Another theme that runs through your work is the spiritual aspects of environmentalism. How do you see the role of religious institutions in the environmental movement?*

McKibben: It’s worth noting that the part of the world that has made the most environmental progress is northern Europe—probably the least religious place in the entire world. So it doesn’t require religion, but religious communities could play a larger role, and I think they’re beginning to. They’re the only institutions left that can cause us to have some goal for human existence other than material accumulation.

We were doing a campaign against SUVs a few years ago. We’d go out on Saturday mornings to car dealerships and talk to the buyers, show them mileage comparisons, let them drive our hybrid, things like that. But the most effective strategy was getting our clergy out. One guy arrived in his collar and everything. He had a big sign that read, “What would Jesus drive?” If you’re at all serious about your faith, that’s the sort of question that you should reflect on.

Boyd: *Since you published *The End of Nature* 13 years ago, what to you have been the clearest signs of progress on climate change?*

McKibben: The great progress has been in the scientific understanding surrounding this issue, and that has led to political change. The Kyoto treaty is no great shakes, and it’s not going to come anywhere near solving the problem, but it was a good first step.

And the fact that it has now been ratified by every major industrial power, save one, is pretty good—that reflects a perceptible change in public opinion around the rest of the world.

The depressing part is that the scientific evidence is direr than it was 13 years ago. Each year seems to bring a greater appreciation for the sensitivities of the planet, and the numbers keep getting worse. Computer modeling

shows a 5% rise in global temperature in this century—a huge, almost unimaginable deviation, and it’s considerably more than what we thought even 10 or 12 years ago.

Boyd: *How do you view the relationship between environmentalism and the anti globalization movement?*

McKibben: There’s real emotion behind the antiglobalization movement, but it’s not clear what program they are going to put forward, aside from a

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kind of reaction against U.S. hegemony. It's a great hodgepodge of anger and frustration all rolled into one, but so far the movement is much less than the sum of its parts.

On college campuses, people are trying to figure out how to get windmills up to power the college and how to make the campus climate more carbon neutral. There are also now a lot of protests about war with Iraq. Whether that will be a distraction or whether these movements will somehow feed into each other, it's very hard to tell.

Boyd: *As a vocal advocate for political change, how do you see that actually coming about?*

McKibben: The task is to keep pushing the political system. People have to become more politically engaged, active citizens. If you come up with a great set of ideas about how to do something, and no one takes it seriously, then you have to figure out some way to shame or coerce people into doing it. That's what politics is about.

There are no good, rational policy arguments for not pricing energy correctly. So one has to ask why it's not happening. And the only answer is because there

has been insufficient political engagement to make it happen. Change of this sort doesn't require 51% public approval. It requires maybe 15%. If people are really riled up, probably less than that is more than enough. If 15% of Americans really wanted national health care, we'd have it next week.

Boyd: *Are there so few broad victories because a lot of environmental politics has devolved to the local level?*

McKibben: It's such an irrational thing to solve carbon problems 50 times over. Some places are arid, some places are wet, some places are steep, some places are flat, and so it makes sense to address water quality at the local level. But in essence, every place has the same atmosphere. What's really horrible about climate change is not just that our inability to deal with it harms us as Americans. The effect is greatest precisely on the people who do nothing to cause the problem. Look at Bangladesh. The basic transportation is the bicycle rickshaw. The amount of carbon that Bangladesh pours into the atmosphere is minuscule, even though there are 140 million people. But in 70 years countries like Bangladesh are going to be under water because we can't control our emissions. That's what distresses me. ■