

Seattle Conscious Choice

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Best-selling author and activist Bill McKibben brings soul and color to some of our most dismal ecological challenges.

Conversations: Bill McKibben

Interview by Ritzy Ryciak

Bill McKibben tells the stories that we wish weren't true — but still need to hear. A best-selling writer and activist, whose byline frequently appears in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Mother Jones*, *Rolling Stone*, *Outside* and *Grist*, McKibben is best known for his work on global warming and climate change issues. Hired right out of Harvard by *The New Yorker* at the tender age of 21, McKibben went on to author many books. His first, 1989's *End of Nature*, is regarded as one of the earliest "general audience" books about climate change.

Through his writings, McKibben brings soul and color to some of our most dismal ecological challenges. He is also a pioneering activist. In 2006 he helped lead a five-day walk across Vermont to demand action on global warming — the largest climate change demonstration to date in America. In January 2007, he founded StepItUp07.org, the organizing hub for a National Day of Climate Action to be held on April 14th, 2007. This month, at hundreds of rallies across the country, thousands of Americans will demand that Congress enact curbs on carbon emissions. At the time of this interview,

there were already over 700 rallies planned in many of America's most iconic places — the levees in New Orleans, the melting glaciers on Mt. Rainier, even underwater on the endangered coral reefs off Key West. Join Bill and many others concerned about climate change at your local step it up rally by visiting StepItUp07.org

We caught up with Bill recently and talked about activism, farmers markets and his powerful new book, *Deep Economy*.

Is the green thing just a passing fad?

No. The organizing principle for the last 100 years was: what will make the economy grow larger? And anything that met that test, we did. For the next 100 years, the organizing principle has got to be: what makes the planet more durable? That has got to be the new lens through which we look at the world.

What issues are most woefully ignored in public discourse?

Until very recently, the most obvious was climate change. Hurricane Katrina blew open the door, and Al Gore walked through. His movie was a powerful educational tool that generated interest and concern and then turned it into political action.

What keeps you up at night?

At this point, it is a sobering moment to have children. I have a 13-year-old. I very much want the world to be a hospitable place for her when she grows up. There is no guarantee for that anymore. Knowing that we live at a moment when some of the most basic and fundamental things about our planet are rapidly changing frightens and motivates me a lot. Of course, the way that we normally try to solve this in our society is saying, "Okay, I am going to make a lot of money and leave it to my child and they will be fine." This solution doesn't work anymore. The problems that we face, like global warming, don't have individual solutions.

How do you research issues like Global Warming and not get completely depressed?

I am not the most optimistic guy in the world [laughing]. I wrote a book called *The End of Nature*. But I am willing to fight hard, and that is what *Deep Economy* is about. Some of the time I do get depressed. At a certain point though, the need to start doing something about all of this kicked in hard. The more that I do things, the better I feel, because I see other people

trying to do the same thing. The other thing that I try to do is spend as much time as I can outdoors. The earth is not going to get any better or more whole than it is right now. One of our jobs (along with protecting it) is to pay witness to its beauty.

Who's on your dream presidential ticket for 2008?

I gotta say, I spend less time worrying about who is going to be president than I do getting the rest of us involved. A powerful political movement, like the Civil Rights movement a generation ago, will be enough to move any president in the right direction. I can feel the uprising coming. The only question is if it is coming in time.

Is there one act that if each of us did, we could change the world for the better?

There are many, many acts that could change the world for the better. We could put in the right light bulb, drive a hybrid. But, the thing that will really change the world for the better — hopefully in enough time to make a big difference — is to become politically involved. We need massive change if we are going to keep the climate from overheating. That's why we did StepItUp07.org — to give people ways to become personally and politically involved.

You state in your writings that once we nurture the essential humanity of our economy, the more likely we are to recapture our own. How is our economy linked to our humanity?

Community has become one of these buzz words. "Building more community." The real pathway to doing that is to resuscitate the economic networks of dependence on each other, which is what community really was in the first place. Fossil fuel is destroying the world. But in addition to that, it has made us less dependent on each other. We don't need each other.

There is a guy here in Vermont that only serves local food at his restaurant, [Farmer's Diner; farmersdiner.com]. He printed up a bunch of bumper stickers that said: "Think globally, act neighborly." The stuff that I am talking about is not in itself conservative or liberal. We need to figure out how to move past polarization. We need to emphasize our neighbors. People today have half as many close friends as they did 50 years ago.

What was the most shocking story or stat that you uncovered while researching your latest book Deep Economy?

Frankly, there, were several. The part that was the most bizarre for me was seeing the amount of data that has been compiled in the last few years surrounding happiness. The data shows Americans are not particularly happy — and that more stuff doesn't make them happier. I believe that to be true. That Sunday school upbringing that told us that money does not bring happiness is now being affirmed by economists.

Another very particular finding was how often the things that we intuitively know to be true turn out to be wrong. Like the idea that we need large industrial farms to efficiently feed ourselves. Really, the highest yields and the most productive agriculture is on smaller farms. This begins to imply a whole long list of other things that are very interesting. If you want to grow the most food on a farm, the best way to do it is to have more farmers per 100 acres, [on plots] 12 to 10 acres in size. The farmer can really know his land and really get the most out of it. We have been so thoroughly convinced that [industrial farming] is a good thing that we have gotten everybody off of the farm. It was this great triumph. We now have more prisoners than farmers. Rural communities have been decimated. We are never going to have 50 percent of Americans on the farm again, but I think that it is a very good sign that more young people are getting interested in farms. Farmers markets are not just a fuzzy, hippy insight. It is a very practical solution to how we might end up feeding ourselves in the long run.

Another particular statistic, done by sociologists who followed people around in supermarkets, is that people have ten times more conversations at farmers markets. Ten times more conversations! The farmers market was not just a slightly different way of delivering calories to people, it was an entirely different organism and implied a ten times healthier community.

What are some questions you wish our readers were asking themselves?

Is what I am doing making me happy? If it is not, how might I change that? What things about my circumstances can I change by myself and what require me to be politically active? Is my way of life at all sustainable? Durable? Could 6 billion people live anything like I am living? If not, what can I change in my life, and more importantly, what can I do politically? If Deep Economy is the long-term answer than StepItUp07.org is the short-term answer.