

EYEING THE DIFFICULT PATH TO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID ORR¹

Environmentalist David Orr says the easy part of helping the United States live within its ecological limits may be passing laws, such as one that puts a price on carbon. The hard part, he maintains in an interview with *Yale Environment 360*, is changing a culture of consumption that causes extensive environmental damage — and unhappiness. Long before buzzwords like “carbon footprint” entered the general lexicon, David W. Orr was working on ways to help humanity lighten its impact on the natural world. A professor of environmental studies at Oberlin College and the author of six books, including *Ecological Literacy*, Orr has focused on how to best educate students about using the Earth’s resources prudently. He also has been a leading proponent of sustainable design on the country’s college campuses, and was the driving force behind building Oberlin’s \$7 million Environmental Studies Center, considered a model of green architecture in the U.S.

Most recently, in his book *Down to the Wire*, Orr tackled the problem of global warming, which he refers to as “planetary destabilization.” The solution, he writes, will require that as the developing world raises its standards of living, the industrialized world must curtail the runaway materialism that has exacted a heavy toll on the natural world. In an interview with *Yale Environment 360* senior editor Fen Montaigne, Orr talked about the current battle over climate and energy legislation, President Obama’s missed opportunity to use his “bully pulpit” to educate the public about global warming, and what he calls the right wing’s “unconscionable misuse” of the airwaves to spread lies and misinformation about climate change.

Orr says that for America and the industrialized world to move onto a truly sustainable footing, society must awaken to what he calls the “profoundly disquieting” effects of the “frantic search for more money and more stuff.” He sees signs of this awakening in the local food movement, the new urbanism pulling people back to cities, and a growing environmental awareness among the younger generation. Much of the shift from “hyper individualism” and rampant consumerism to a greener, more community-oriented lifestyle, says Orr, “will not only be possible and not only be painless, but in fact will help us create higher levels of happiness and satisfaction.”

Yale Environment 360: This has been a very rough [few] months for people interested in the threat of global warming. There was the relative lack of action in Copenhagen, the [controversy over the hacked e-mails](#), the stalled action on the climate bill in the U.S. Congress, and polls showing that Americans, at least, are in fact becoming more skeptical about climate change and perhaps weary of the subject.

David Orr: The good news is that climate science survived intact. The hacked emails didn’t show anything much more than professional chatter you get in the teacher’s lounge or the wash-up room outside a surgery theater in a hospital. There was nothing that impugned the science. And the one mistake that was apparently found in the IPCC Fourth Report didn’t amount to much — the Himalayan glaciers disappearing in 35 years, that was also corrected elsewhere in that report. On the public attitudes and opinions, the issues were compounded by recession on one side and people’s attention automatically sways over to economic and bread and butter issues when times are hard.

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On the politics of climate, I'm actually fairly optimistic that there will be climate legislation passed. I think that there is, strangely enough, a kind of emerging consensus in some parts of the Republican Party that they can't stonewall on this issue forever. I think the logic of the situation, the vast weight of the science, and the prospect of continually destabilizing weather patterns is kind of an inexorable force pushing us toward some kind of response to these issues... The political response so far at the national and international levels has been clearly inadequate. But I think the weight of all of this has got to change that at some point.

e360: You think some sort of legislation would be passed, in the form of cap-and-trade, or a carbon tax?

Orr: The difference is not necessarily in the mechanism, it's the will to make the mechanism work. The best designed cap-and-trade system you can imagine, without the political will to actually execute, would be disastrous, and the same would be true of taxation... But I think either of those, or both of them in combination, would be a smart policy. The way the bill came out of the house, the Waxman-Markey bill, it was way too complicated. Way too many concessions to fossil fuel industries. I would prefer if you'll have cap-and-trade, an auction system with the proceeds then sent back to the public, or put into public investment or some combination of the two.

e360: But the American public just doesn't yet seem convinced of [global warming]. What's it going to take?

Orr: Gallup polls show the American public is the least informed and most confused about the issue of any public in developed nations. It is part of the problem. Now why are they confused? There are several obvious components to an answer. One is that the educational system turns out people who really don't understand science and how the Earth works as a physical system. And the other is, frankly, the continual flow of bad information, misinformation, outright lies, and distortion that come through the media system. So the fact that 91 percent of talk radio, according to Center for American Progress, is extreme right wing, where you're not going to hear anything about climate change and what they do is going to be mostly wrong... This is an unconscionable misuse of the public commons to confuse the public about an issue on which there is virtually unanimity amongst scientists who study climate for a living. It doesn't mean, however, that there are no unknowns on this issue. There are unknowns.

e360: If something is going to be done before it is too late, how do you leap that hurdle?

Orr: In the president's Climate Action Project, which was aimed at the first 100 days of the Obama administration, we proposed the president go to the American public, right out of the starting box, and give the climate equivalent of the Day of Infamy speech. And walk the public through the science. Use what Teddy Roosevelt called the bully pulpit, as a chief educator of the public. And walk us through why this is a critical issue. So I think a good bit of what has to happen falls under the title of leadership.

e360: So clearly President Obama did not give that equivalent of the Day of Infamy speech. How disappointed are you that that didn't happen?

Orr: Well, I think it was a mistake not to put that issue first. But that's second guessing, and I'm just a professor in Ohio, and he's president of the United States. But I think it should have been first for a couple of reasons. One is it is the most pressing issue. Let's say we've gotten the perfect health care bill through, but the health of the planet is failing, that health bill doesn't

amount to much. Secondly, in terms of strategy, the climate and energy issue is much more clearly, to most people, an economic issue. That is jobs and economic stimulation. Third reason is if you get climate and energy right, you get a lot of other things right as well. You lessen severe problems of security, balance of payments, pollution, unemployment, and you begin to take advantage of what Americans have typically done very well, and that's technology. We've been historically very good at innovating and bringing in new kinds of technologies. That would have been in hindsight, from my perspective, a much smarter course than putting a health care bill first. But it also would have meant that the president needed to go to the public early and take an active role in driving climate legislation through Congress. I don't think it was appropriate simply to sit back and let them hash it out.

e360: How would you judge the president's overall performance on energy and the environment?

Orr: President Obama was given a very deep hole to climb out of. The economy was collapsing, we were fighting and losing two wars, the political environment of the country was just awful. And so he was given probably as tough a challenge as any president. On many things, the president has done I think extraordinarily well. Steven Chu, secretary of energy, is terrific. **John Holdren**, the [White House] science advisor, and **Jane Lubchenco** at NOAA — he's appointed really good people. The stimulus package had a lot of money for wind power and development. What we don't have is a framework for overall climate legislation. And I think that's a huge problem. But he has done, to his credit, a great deal more than any other previous president to move us toward efficiency and renewable energy. But you always measure these things relative to the magnitude of the thing they're trying to fix. And relative to climatic destabilization, that's an interesting start, but it is not nearly enough at this point.

e360: You write that to really tackle this problem, countries like the U.S. have got to slash carbon emissions in the next 40 years about 90 percent, and that the average American's production of carbon dioxide has got to go from about 22 tons a year to one or two tons. How do we get from here to there? How do you reduce the emissions of a public that's living a pretty sweet life right now based on fossil fuels?

Orr: Well, a couple of comments. At the global level, this is being called, among other things, contraction and convergence. So developed economies like that of the United States have got to begin to contract, and other economies will begin to converge on some number that allows us to stabilize climate. That's the background of the picture. The foreground is, how do we actually get there? And I think there are a couple different answers to that. One is, we do need a price on carbon. And we do need clear signals to the public that when you buy a house, appliances, cars, anything that uses energy, you buy efficiency.

And secondly, we need public policies that make it easy to deploy renewable technologies. And so the Europeans have used feed-in tariffs, or in this country sometimes most states have now net-metering provisions, that you're a small scale power producer you can net-meter, and the utility will buy back the power. Those things need to be streamlined. Public policy needs to be aligned with those long-term goals. And it is not now. You can look at any number of institutional, financial, and regulatory barriers that block any movement in that direction.

I think there's another kind of answer, however, and that is that you say we live pretty sweet lives. But many of us don't. And many people who live with a lot of consumption find life anything but sweet. But obviously GNP continued to rise so you've got to explain a gap between the amount of stuff that we make and we have and throw away, and the level of happiness or

satisfaction that you've got. And that's a big gap. And I think, in lots of ways, the growth economy created more junk than you needed, more expectations than it could meet, more waste than the environment could absorb, and more trouble generally than we needed to create. And the literature on happiness shows that, not surprisingly, happiness is a function of a much simpler calculation. Beyond some fairly minimal level of comfort, we find satisfaction in our friendships and social relationships. It's what brings us together that makes us really happy and makes life satisfying. And to a great extent, the amount of stuff that we have, the frantic search for more stuff and more money to buy more stuff is profoundly disquieting... And I think the transition town movement, and the voluntary simplicity movement, and the slow food movement, and the slow money movement, are all driven by people who recognize we were defrauded. That system never worked as it was purported to work. And so I think there is a good bit of the quote "contraction" that will not only be possible and not only be painless, but in fact will help us create higher levels of happiness and satisfaction.

And I think the logic of higher fuel costs and climate change and terrorism — all these combined threats are the silver lining that there's a better life for us that is a different way to think about society. It's more self-contained towns. We found that when the real estate market collapsed, that the suburbs not only were lonely places fostering a lot of fossil fuel use, they were financially completely unsustainable. But they also weren't that nice to live in sometimes. It was too much traffic. Too many hours spent in cars and freeways. The new urbanism, fairly tightly-contained places where you've got walking access or biking access to shops, stores, schools, employment, parks, recreation, nice downtowns — that's now the pattern emerging in development. And it doesn't surprise me a bit. It's a convergence between human psychology and the need for sociability... And so we know that we can create that kind of development here. So could we make that transition? Yes. And I think that we're moving in that direction. Fast enough? No. But there is movement in that direction.

And the logic of higher energy costs mean that the centrifugal pressures on urban development, which we call sprawl, will probably reverse and become much more centripetal, pulling people back into a coherent downtown area...

The changes are also going to have to be in public policy, the way what we tax, where we build infrastructure, if you build roads, wires, pipes — development tends to follow that. And what Portland, Oregon did years ago was to put a growth boundary around the city, which deflected investment into the city, and then secondly created a light rail system that made it very easy to move around in that system. So you go to Portland right now, it's not Nirvana, but it's a very nice city. There's a recognizable downtown, it's a 24/7 kind of place for the most part.

The larger issue to me is where politics and markets work together. Markets are where you and I say, "I." And politics, where we conduct the public business, are where you and I say, "We." Both within a generation, and then the "we" that also connects us to our grandchildren and the long-term future. And so I think there's a larger political issue here that in making land use decisions and decisions about urban development, we need to escape from hyper individualism, that whatever I want, I can have, and into a very different view of the public good.

e360: You're talking about what almost amounts to heresy in the United States, which is no more perpetual growth.

Orr: There's a long literature on growth that shows unimpeachably that beyond some point, growth becomes ill wealth. It means you just compound your problems. The benefits begin to diminish relative to the problems it creates. And we all kind of know that. That's no great

revelation — that the idea that we can't afford to build, let's say, high-speed rail systems and light rail systems is nonsense. We subsidize cars. We do it indirectly. We subsidize road building, gasoline, all the military force we have to maintain to guarantee our access to cheap fuels. So we pay for these things whether we get them or not. And the assumption is we can't afford environmental quality or sustainability, but in fact we're paying for it. And you pay for a kilowatt-hour of electricity, and the reality is that it costs us a good bit more than that. And if you factor in costs of healthcare, asthma, lung disease, and the 20,000 to 50,000 people who die prematurely every year from breathing small particle pollution from coal-fired power plants that generate half of our electricity, all of a sudden the costs become prohibitively high. And so what appeared to be cheap energy wasn't really cheap at all. It's just that you didn't account for it. You paid for it in health cost, and lost lives, and lost productivity, and land degradation, and water pollution, and so forth, but those were not tacked on to the electric bill that you got every month.

e360: On this issue of high-speed rail and light rail, do you think our sense of international competitiveness or national pride may work to the benefit of moving in the direction of more sustainable transportation, in that China is now building all these regional rail systems where they're zipping around at 250, 300 miles an hour? Don't you think that at some point Americans are going to go, "Hey, you know this whole green revolution, we've got to get on board here. We're just lagging terribly behind Europe, behind China."

Orr: The public [needs] to wake up and say, why doesn't the Acela get 200 miles an hour? Why can't we figure that out? The Chinese have done it. The Europeans have done it. Are we that dumb? And the answer is, until we decide not to be dumb, as [Tom Friedman](#) put it, "We can be as dumb as we want to be." And we decided for the time being, that we're going to be dumb. And it's not an IQ problem, it's frankly a political and communications problem.

And that's our choice also. If the opposition party says, "We are going to throw sand in the gears and we're not going to let us move on this." You go back and you think, 1969, we created the Environmental Protection Agency, the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, Wilderness Act. We did all that, and I think there were only three or four negative votes against even the Endangered Species Act. It was Republicans and Democrats coming together.

We've done it in the past; there's no reason why we couldn't do it in the future. Except that the opposition party in this case now decides, "No, we're not gonna play ball with you. Whatever it is, however good it is for the country, we're not gonna play ball with you." Now I don't know what words you put that on. You can't imagine — no terrorist has done that much damage to us. The Republican Party has decided, and I consider myself to be a somewhat conservative person, but this is no longer conservatism of the sort that Edmund Burke would have recognized. This is something else.