

# Bill McKibben

## *The challenge to environmentalism*

Quantity can redefine quality: meaning can and does change if something gets big enough to pass some invisible but real threshold.

Consider, for instance, how the atom bomb redefined the ways we thought about conflict and war. The old ideas – particularly that warfare was a kind of natural extension of statecraft – had survived a great deal of scaling up, from Agincourt to Antietam, from Thermopylae to Tarawa. But the explosion of the first nuclear weapon, though in some sense just a much larger version of things we’d been doing for years, clearly made us reconsider the idea of war. Oppenheimer, watching the first desert test, quoted from the Gita: “We are become as gods, destroyers of worlds.” We’ve managed to fight plen-

ty of nasty wars since, but we’ve always made sure to keep them relatively small and manageable. The intellectual edifice we’d built around battle – from just war theory to Clausewitz – no longer works very well. When you could postulate a war that could not just kill millions but poison the soil with radioactivity, potentially trigger an endless nuclear winter, and generally raise the whole concept of return to the Stone Age, sheer quantity redefined meaning.

Now, too, with the environment. The relationship between people and the natural world has been largely taken for granted for most of human history – our impact upon the physical world was small enough not to raise deep conceptual problems. We had great effect on particular places around us – our fields, our forests – but those effects seemed to stop at the edge of our settlements. It was a long time indeed before we began even to suspect that we were putting much larger forces into play. George Perkins Marsh, in the mid-nineteenth century, was among the first to posit the possibility that, say, cutting down whole woodlands was changing hydrological cycles. Rachel Carson, in the mid-twentieth century, was among the first to suggest that our effects, albeit on an invisible level, could now be felt across the whole

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of creation (a suggestion that took the first real shine off the idea of technical progress for most Americans). But it's only in recent years, with the dawning understanding of how massively we have altered the earth's climate, that we really reach a sea change in our understanding of nature.

We are forced, for the first time, to understand that we are a truly titanic force, capable of affecting and altering the operation of the planetary whole. It's a startling revelation – we seem set to raise sea levels, change the seasons, determine the range of most every other species. You can measure our impact already, in drought and flood and melt. That means that we as a species, and even as individuals, mean something different: like Alice on her first pill, we've gone small to large in short order, earned a kind of unwanted agency.

We can see the practical effects of this shift already in the environmental movement, which in the last few years has morphed into the global warming movement. That's where the money and the politics are concentrated: if you're a land conservationist, you're busy trying to figure out some theory of carbon sequestration that will allow you to go on, say, protecting forests or farmland. But as the environmental movement is quickly learning, it's not scaled for this kind of work. The panoply of organizations that saved various watersheds, built national parks, staved off oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and even passed the kind of legislation that forced automakers to install catalytic converters are heroic – but they are not up to the task of reshaping our economic life, which is what global warming demands. Forget filters – we're talking about the wholesale decarbonization of our country, about removing the fossil fuel base on which our prosperity has so far rest-

ed, and about doing it in the space of a decade or two. That's too much heavy lifting for the heirs of John Muir.

Instead, as its scale changes so dramatically, the problem of 'the environment' needs to go from 'a problem' to some other category. Instead of being one issue on a checklist, it will become a lens through which we survey the world. That's the role economic growth currently plays, and indeed has played for two centuries now. If something made the economy – our private ones, but especially our national ones – larger, then we generally assented; by now it feels inevitable and obvious. But as we start to see the effects of that endless expansion writ large, its continued virtue becomes a little less clear. Instead, the need for durability and resiliency (or to use the inelegant jargon of the movement, 'sustainability') is starting to compete. We see proposals for green GNP, for carbon pricing to reflect the 'true cost' of oil and gas, and so on. More and more this will be the lens through which we measure progress, and one effect will be to make some form of environmentalism so pervasive that the 'movement' itself is somewhat swallowed up. We don't, after all, have an 'economic growth' movement because for the moment all agree (though we arguably have political parties that cater more to the demand for expansion).

These are largely pragmatic considerations; they involve our continued prosperity and perhaps our continued survival. (And they involve, crucially, some new conception of justice across both geography and time, as it becomes clear that most of the world is not going to be able to follow our extravagant example. Nothing will shake our moral sense, our foreign policy, even our theology, as much as the understanding that we've eaten all of the world's cake, and are

now making it hard to put even bread on the table.) But as these shifts transform our sense of how carefully we need to tread on the natural world, they will also usher in a new possibility for a different kind of environmentalism that dates at least to Thoreau: the deep concern with where as humans we find meaning.

In a consumer society we've entrusted this concern mostly to the economy (just as in the theocratic one that preceded it we looked mostly to the church). But the economy can't do the job anymore, in part because excessive consumption is precisely what drives the environmental crisis we find ourselves in. And in part as well because we're finally starting to sense the limits of consumption to provide meaning and pleasure in a sated, even gluttonous, society. The countercultural critique that began with the first Earth Day and then abated somewhat seems now to be returning, albeit in gentler form: farmers' markets are the fastest growing part of the food economy in America, for instance. That's partly because they provide more ecologically sensible (and tasty and healthy) food, and partly because they help re-create the dense web of connections between people that were swept away in a centralizing, globalizing economy. The average shopper at a farmers' market has ten times as many conversations as the average shopper at a supermarket – that order of magnitude is a sign of the world we might be able to build, of the pleasures we might be able to substitute for stuff.

I predict that environmentalism will find itself increasingly interested in promoting this kind of reconnection: that 'wildness,' since Muir the animating force of environmentalism, will become relatively less important than 'community.' (My guess is that the most committed environmentalists now read

more Wendell Berry than they do Muir or anyone else.) Both wildness and community continue in short supply, but the key to preserving any of the former may lie in building far more of the latter. The data shows, for instance, that even (or especially) among committed environmentalists, the imperative to build windmills now outranks the imperative to protect birds from their blades – largely because we've grown to understand that climate change will cause endlessly more avian carnage. You can't make a wilderness any more by drawing a line on the map – carbon dioxide is uninterested in lines. But you might be able to slow down the great warming with a farmers' market here and a solar panel there (and there, and there, and there as well), and in the process save some species and some habitats. The vastly increased scale of our damage, that is, may lead to an at least slightly decreased scale of our economic life. The twenty-first century, at least in the rich world, may be about trying to become smaller again.

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