Emagazine.com
THE ONLINE HOME OF E - THE ENVIRONMENTAL MAGAZINE

MAY 2010

COVER STORY

The New Environmental Activists

Despite Apathy and Climate Skepticism, a New Grassroots Environmental Movement Is On the Rise

By Christine MacDonald

Let's face it: Things are looking pretty bleak on the environmental front. Scientists warn we are running out of time to put the breaks on global warming before the planet slips beyond a "livable" climate, but public opinion is headed in the other direction. Two years ago, an overwhelming majority of Americans—71%—agreed global warming was happening and only 10% doubted it. But after "Climategate," in which hacked e-mails between U.K. climate scientists showed that certain information was being withheld from the public, the economic recession and the politicization of global warming, that consensus has slipped dramatically. A new poll shows just over one-half of the public now believes that global warming is a serious problem. In 2010, just 57% think global warming is real, while the numbers of doubters has doubled, according to a poll by the Yale Project on Climate Change and the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University. This growing skepticism combined with such setbacks as the failure of last December's international climate talks in Copenhagen has made these trying times for environmentalists.

Amid these dreary developments, however, are stirrings of a new popular uprising at the grassroots of the environmental movement. Individuals around the country are putting themselves on the line to remind their fellow humans what the stakes are. After decades of inside-the-Beltway politicking by the nation's largest green groups with nothing to show for it but a scattering of victories, taking to the streets in protest, they say, isn't looking quite so unreasonable.

"We have to throw ourselves into the gears of the machine that threaten our survival. That's the one advantage we have over the deniers and their spin doctors," 28-year-old activist Tim DeChristopher says. "When we make sacrifices for what we believe in, all the people defending their short-term profits aren't going to be willing to do the same. That's how we show that we're telling the truth."

Tim DeChristopher; (in blue jacket) protests with other Utah residents on April 6, 2010, as part of a "Fossil Fools Day" event organized by his group Peaceful Uprising. The protest, held outside the Kennecott Copper coal-fired power plant in Utah's Salt Lake Valley, was meant to call attention to coal's deadly environmental impact.

© Daphne Hougard

The former University of Utah economics student took his own advice in December 2008, turning up at a Utah auction for oil and gas leases on more than 110,000 acres of federal land. The sales were green-lighted during the last month of the Bush administration, despite the fact that the land in question bordered Arches and Canyonlands National Parks and Dinosaur National Monument, a wild west of ruddy plateaus, sagebrush, piñon trees and prehistoric rock art. Posing as a bidder, DeChristopher won 14 parcels, representing 22,500 acres, before officials halted the auction and escorted him out. The sales were later blocked by a federal judge following a restraining order on the leases by seven environmental groups, including the National Resources Defense Council. In February 2009, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, under a new Obama administration,

cancelled leases on 77 parcels from the Utah auction, representing 130,225 acres, saying that we must explore for oil and gas "in a thoughtful and balanced way that allows us to protect our signaure landscapes and cultural resources."

But DeChristopher now faces a maximum sentence of 10 years in federal prison and fines of $750,000. Since his arrest, he's been working full-time for Peaceful Uprising, a grassroots group he founded to raise awareness about climate change and other environmental issues in Utah. His trial date is set for June 21 in U.S. District Court in Salt Lake City. While DeChristopher says he has no desire to go to jail, he'd take a similar risk again in a heartbeat.

The same is true for Julia "Judy" Bonds, an Appalachian grandmother, who won the prestigious 2003 Goldman Environmental Prize but has also been the recipient of death threats, assaults and YouTube attacks for her stance against the mountaintop removal coal mining that is laying waste to her community's iconic landscape.

"We accept the fact that some of us might not make it through this fight," Bonds concedes. Still, in her view, powerful change is coming. "More and more people are talking about the environment," she says. "You can't put the genie back in the bottle. But we can't sit still on every bit of ground that we've gained in the last five years. We've got to keep pushing."

The guy with the biggest megaphone, meawhile, hardly fits the "radical" mold. From the elite campus of Middlebury College in Vermont, mild-mannered author Bill McKibben has launched 350.org, the first high-profile, popular effort in decades to get average citizens riled up and into the streets to demand environmental protection. "I don't have any secret to this," McKibben says. "There is no substitute for organizing. You have to go talk to people and get them on board."

His global warming awareness campaign orchestrated a day of climate action last year that led to more than 5,200 events in 181 countries. CNN called it "the most widespread day of political action in the planet's history."

The Death of Activism

In recent decades, protesting has largely become passé—with the exception of growing civil unrest among the country's conservatives known as the Tea Party movement. But in environmental circles, activists are an endangered species. These days, most agitating takes place in front of a computer screen, if at all.

"Political mobilization has just kind of died. We don't do it any more," says Robert J. Brulle, a professor of sociology and environmental science at Drexel University in Philadelphia. As a high school student, he was one of the estimated 22 million people who participated in the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970. "Ten percent of the population came out—that would be 30 million people now," he says.

He compares that 1970s-style turnout to the few hundred souls who joined him in Philadelphia last October for 350.org's event there, and sees the stark contrast as telling.

CNN may have called the global day of action the most widespread in history, but it was also pretty thin on the ground, as have been other U.S. attempts at environmental mass mobilizations in recent decades.

"The real issue is that people aren't all that worked up about climate change," says Brulle, pointing to the annual Gallup public opinion polls used to track issues that most worry Americans. Year after year, the environment lags far behind economic and other issues on the list of "problems and priorities" facing the nation.

"We've basically become consumer zombies," says Erik Assadourian, senior researcher at Worldwatch Institute, an environmental think tank in Washington, D.C. "It's this terrible treadmill that we've gotten on, in which activism or any kind of political action isn't included."

Julia "Butterfly" Hill, who saved an ancient California Redwood with a 738-day tree sit a decade ago, frets: "In Western culture, we are so addicted to comfort that we will sell out for comfort. I don't know if we have the capacity to break our addiction in time."

Julia "Butterfly" Hill saved an ancient Redwood with a 738-day tree sit a decade ago. *© Barry Shainbaum*

Moved by Desperation

Many activists say what propels them is not hope so much as desperation, a feeling that if they didn't act, who would? "I felt like I had no choice because these chemicals would

have polluted the planet," says Arlene Blum, a chemist who won the 2008 Purpose Prize and has climbed some of the tallest mountains in the world, including setting an altitude record for an American woman of 24,500 feet on Mount Everest in 1976. Through her mostly volunteer organization, the Green Science Policy Institute, Blum has led a successful international campaign to stop the use of unneeded and toxic flame retardant chemicals in consuer products.

It was her climbing experience that got her through, she says. "You have to put one foot in front of the other despite storms or avalanches, whether climbing the world's highest mountains or protecting our health from toxins," Blum says. "There is no choice."

"I find myself crying a lot. It's overwhelming," says Erin Brockovich, the legal researcher turned activist, whose role in winning a $333 million settlement from the Pacific Gas and Electric Company in a groundwater contamination case in Hinkley, California, was made into a movie. "One of the things I learned in Hinkley is when you stick your finger in the dike to try and fix one problem, a thousand other problems open up."

But, she adds: "For me, it's simply the right thing to do. I'm going to fight to make that link that what we are doing to the environment is hurting our health."

Big Tent Environmentalism

Environmentalists have long been criticized for a misanthropic tendency to put the welfare of plants and animals before humans. But today the dividing lines between causes and movements are in flux. Many eco-activists see human and habitat health as inextricably intertwined. Others see themselves primarily as political or anti-corporate operatives but end up waving the environmentalist banner because it just makes sense.

Arlene Blum credits her mountain climbing experience with helping her challenge chemical companies.
© Jewish Women's Archive

"Corporations destroy the environment. I really don't see the difference," says Jacques Servin (also known as Andy Bichlbaum) of the performance activism collective the Yes Men, which embarrassed the U.S. Chamber of Commerce last year with a phony press release and spoof press conference that temporarily rewrote the chamber's position on climate legislation.

By reframing the issues, upstart groups appeal to a wider audience that includes people who would never be caught dead hugging a tree. They are part of the fastest growing segment of the environmental movement, according to the Urban Institute's National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS). The center found that the number of U.S. environment and welfare organizations with $25,000 or more in gross receipts grew by 108% between 1997 and 2007. Besides nixing old-school definitions and dogmas, small radical groups often keep their focus local, even if their networks and concerns are global.

"We've been focused on national political responses for so long that we forgot locally is where politics happens," says Brian Sloan, a campaigner with Rising Tide North America, which he says is "the largest all-volunteer climate action network in the country."

Sloan and a few dozen members of his Portland, Oregon, chapter of Rising Tide are fighting plans for a liquid natural gas terminal on the Columbia River and to prevent the expansion of the local airport. In the process, they have cultivated allies in many poor and rural communities, showing locals modern grassroots strategies like how to organize and talk to reporters. Most of the people they meet are disenchanted by mainstream environmentalism.

"One of the biggest problems we have is that people have a lot of preconceived notions of how environmentalists work," says Sloan. "Some of it is a [right wing] smear campaign, but there's a lot of truth, too." He adds that he's often had to prove that Rising Tide is not paid by or associated with any well-known national groups. "People are a lot more comfortable with us being radicals," he says, "as long as we're up front about it."

Turning Against Big Green

Today's grassroots call to action is, in many ways, a sign of frustration with groups like Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Sierra Club whose insider tactics have come under fire in recent years as ineffectual and even counterproductive.

"I resent it when I'm called an environmentalist these days," says Tim Hermach, who led a major national campaign to ban logging in public lands a decade ago and was involved in insurgent efforts to change the Sierra Club's leadership. He likens the professionals leading the Club and other national environmental groups to a bunch of softball players getting creamed in a game of hardball with corporate titans."We're in a war," he says. "It's not a time to play Tiddlywinks!"

DeChristopher, legendary tree spiker Mike Roselle and many other frontline activists agree it's time to jettison Big Green's insider strategy.

"The conventional wisdom is you work through the system. I just don't see that working," says Roselle, who helped found some of the country's most radical groups—Earth First, Rainforest Action Network and Ruckus Society. He has taken his current operation, Climate Ground Zero, to West Virginia, where his gritty band of activists have reinforced Bonds and other Appalachian natives at Coal River Mountain in a stand against Massey Energy Co. and its mountaintop removal mining operation there.

"I started Climate Ground Zero because other organizations weren't willing to take creative nonviolence to this level," Roselle said in a phone interview in late February. The next day, he was jailed for protesting outside Massey offices in the Coal River Valley. It was his sixth arrest. More than 100 other activists have been jailed for hanging banners, tree-sitting and generally disrupting mining on the mountain since February 2009, when the civil disobedience campaign began in earnest.

Erin Brockovich (left) has found hidden reserves of strength; Jana Chicoine's fight is in her Massachusetts town.

© Office of Senator Daniel Akaka

"It's not a job; it's a calling," Roselle says. "You have to be willing to make sacrifices and take risks. The professional environmentalists are afraid of risk. For them, it's a job. They just go through the motions."

Referring to the fact that most national groups pay their staffers well and their chief executives hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, Roselle says, "they have bought into the upper middle class American dream. If you take away that paycheck, I'm not sure they'd still be there."

In contrast, Roselle says he never has more than a month's operating expenses in Climate Ground Zero's bank account at any time, but that doesn't bother him much. "I've had my share of big paychecks," he says.

The Impact of Professional Environmentalists

Students of the U.S. environmental movement say the decline of the activist has been induced by the nation's leading green groups—that in the decades since the 1970s, the Big Greens have supplanted empowered citizens with environmental professionals.

In the process, the movement has grown enormously. Today it's a bona fide economic sector, with tens of thousands of employees and assets that nearly tripled from $11.5 billion in 1995 to $31.6 billion in 2005, according to the NCCS.

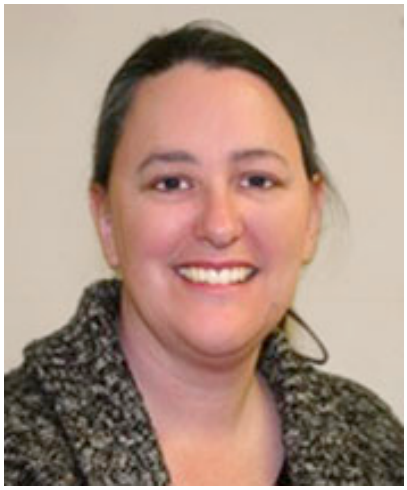
But can these large, professionally run operations still be considered grassroots?

Opinion pollsters say that the public generally perceives them this way but if you look closely, many national groups are run from the top down with little or no membership input—even if they even allow individuals to join—according to Brulle, who studies U.S. environmentalism from a sociological standpoint.

"Try to go to a meeting of the National Resources Defense Council, Environmental Defense Fund or Greenpeace. You can't, because they don't have them," Brulle says.

At groups that still let individuals join, membership fees comprise a small percentage of the group's budget. The Sierra Club, for instance, one of the country's leading environmental membership organizations, gets only about a quarter of its funding from member dues, according to its 2008 tax return.

Increasingly, the groups that set the environmental agenda in Washington are beholden to private foundation grants, government contracts, and donations from wealthy moguls and corporations. These ties have made them reluctant to take up fights against their congressional allies and corporate sponsors even when the science clearly calls for it, critics say.



Stopping a local incinerator

In response to these complaints, a whole new wing of the U.S. environmental movement has emerged since the 1980s, Douglas Bevington, forest program director for Environment Now explains in his book, The Rebirth of Environmentalism

(Island Press). Instead of aligning with politicians and corporate executives, these new groups have used publicity campaigns, lawsuits, tree sits and other strategies to expand enforcement of the Endangered Species Act and other environmental laws. They have even, at times, managed to get hard-hitting legislation introduced in state legislatures and the U.S. Congress—feats once believed to be the exclusive domain of the Big Greens with their legions of staff lawyers and lobbyists. Bevington points to the National Forest Protection and Restoration Act, changes to federal endangered species legislation spearheaded by the Center for Biological Diversity; and, on the state level, California's Forests Forever Initiative. These efforts didn't become law, but they came close. "These groups showed the environmental movement how to be both bold and influential," Bevington says.

For Andy Mahler, longtime organizer of the Heartwood Forest Council, activists play a crucial role now, "when an effective story can reach hundreds of millions of people simultaneously with a message of perseverance, hope and determination."

Not everyone is prepared to be a beacon, and that's OK, activists say. "The important thing is for everyone to focus on 'What is my place in the movement?'," Hill says. Of tree-climbing and risk-taking, she adds: "it's in my character design. Some people run from risks. I look to where the edge is and run there and trust that I will get what I need."

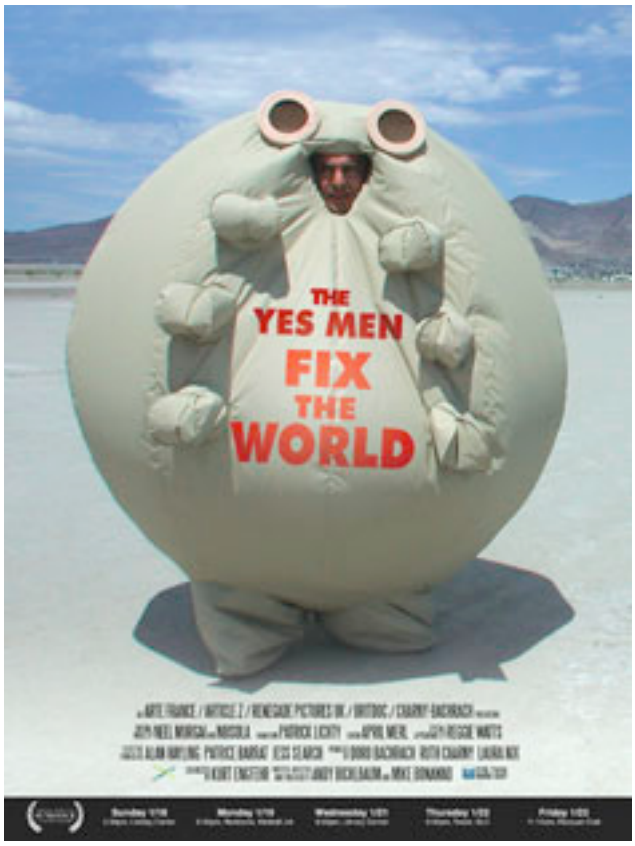
She and others stress that just because the issues are serious that doesn't mean there isn't room for humor. Most grassroots activists agreed that the most powerful act of protest is when people put their bodies on the line. But, those who have taken risks and made sacrifices say it can also be enormously fun and soul affirming.

"By sticking my neck out there, I've grown a lot taller and realized potential I didn't even know I had," DeChristopher says.

Brockovich adds that once she shed labels she had let society put on her, she found an unexpected reservoir of strength. "Once you put yourself out there and you're still standing, you really get empowered by that. And you want to do it again. I get thrown under the bus every day, and I'm still standing," she says.

Of Activists and Skepticism

Getting all the issues under one tent is complicated and doesn't always work. Consider the case of Jana Chicoine, co-founder and spokeswoman for Concerned Citizens of Russell. For five years, Chicoine, her husband and neighbors have been holding off a company that would build a biomass



The Yes Men, use performance activism, captured in the documentary "The Yes Men Fix the World."
© *Sundance*

incinerator in their Western Massachusetts town of about 1,700 people. In that time, she's become a seasoned activist, linked to a network of grassroots environmentalists around the country and abroad. However, Chicoine says she's not convinced that global warming is such a big problem.

"I don't know who to believe. I see a lot of scientists arguing about it and read some of those East Anglia e-mails," she says, referring to the stolen e-mails from the University of East Anglia, home base of the Climatic Research Unit, which touched off the climategate controversy in November 2009. Climate change skeptics have seized upon the e-mails to argue that climatologists colluded in manipulating data to bolster their case for global warming.

While Chicoine's views put her firmly in the mainstream of the country's growing skepticism, there is no credible debate in scientific circles today. Despite attacks on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and errors that appeared in the panel's 2007 report, more than 200 U.S. scientists signed an open letter in March defending the IPCC and reaffirming its central finding "that 'warming of the climate system is unequivocal' and that most of the observed increase in global average temperatures since the mid-twentieth century is very likely due to observed increase in anthropogenic greenhouse gas concentrations."

Of course, such scientific speak doesn't always translate well, which has complicated the work of climate activists. "Most people are not very convinced by science. For most folks, all the data in the world isn't going to move people in a deep way—a human way," DeChristopher says. "What we need to do is show people we believe it—that we're talking about the biggest threat and that children's lives hang in the balance."

What's needed now, he says, is "putting it on the line and acting with desperation. If you want people to believe that your house is on fire, you had better scream, 'My house is on fire!'"

In It for the Long Haul

With climate change seemingly on a runaway course, many committed activists say it's shoulder-to-the-grindstone time. And they have reason to hope.

With Mike Roselle's band of mountain defenders practicing creative nonviolence in Appalachian coal country, the Yes Men pulling down the pants of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and DeChristopher forcing a halt to those drilling leases on public land, the monkey wrenchers are having a pretty good run lately.

And recent changes in the leadership of Greenpeace and the Sierra Club have inspired hope that at least some of the country's "blue chip" environmental groups may be girding for a street fight.

Meanwhile, the Yes Men are launching the Yes Lab this year. The mobile enterprise will allow their disciples to develop their own Yes Men-like stunts.

"We realized that online isn't enough," Servin says. "People have certain fears and it's a lot of work" for people to carry off a Yes Men-like caper on their own. "We're thinking that we have to get people together physically."

Where to Go from Here?

"We've made some real progress," McKibben says. "The question is where do we go from here?"

Some think mountaintop removal will be the powder keg to set off the next mass movement. "This place right here feels like Selma, Alabama, in 1963," says Bonds, referring to the tiny town in the segregated South where a small but courageous group of residents began a daring effort to register African Americans to vote. Within two years—and only after 600 civil rights marchers were attacked by state and local police wielding billy clubs and tear gas—the Voting Rights Act of 1965 became law, ushering in sweeping social changes that many believe may not have happened without the bravery of Selma's grassroots activists.

Today, it will take a new kind of movement, one that overrides pervasive apathy, says Assadourian at Worldwatch. "I don't think we can mobilize en masse," he says. "We'll need to mobilize a proxy group of sorts." Lately, he's been giving a lot of thought to how a small but determined number of activists could use creative tactics to block all roads into the capital and shut down Washington until Congress passes climate legislation.

The Yes Men, led by Jacques Servin, use performance activism.

McKibben, in his new book Eaarth (Times Books), suggests that the new protest movement won't be about marching on Washington at all. He's calling for "distributed public action"—local protests across the globe—each demanding that the world's leaders take climate action. Many argue that it's time to stop trying to convince climate change deniers and start mobilizing those people who already believe. It's a sizable number, according to the 2009 "Six Americas" study of views on climate change by Yale and George Mason Universities. According to that in-depth examination, 18% of American adults describe themselves as "alarmed" by global warming. Nearly everyone in this group (99%) told pollsters that they would not be easily persuaded to change their minds.

"Change in America has never happened because everybody got on board," DeChristopher says. "After Congress and Copenhagen have failed, people are seeing that our leaders aren't going to solve the problem unless we force them to."