

An Interview with Bill McKibben

Casey Walker: *In The End of Nature, you wrote, "I cannot imagine any change more extreme than the change from four billion years of nature to year one of artifice." Will you describe this scale of extreme change and how it seems to slip past our grasp?*

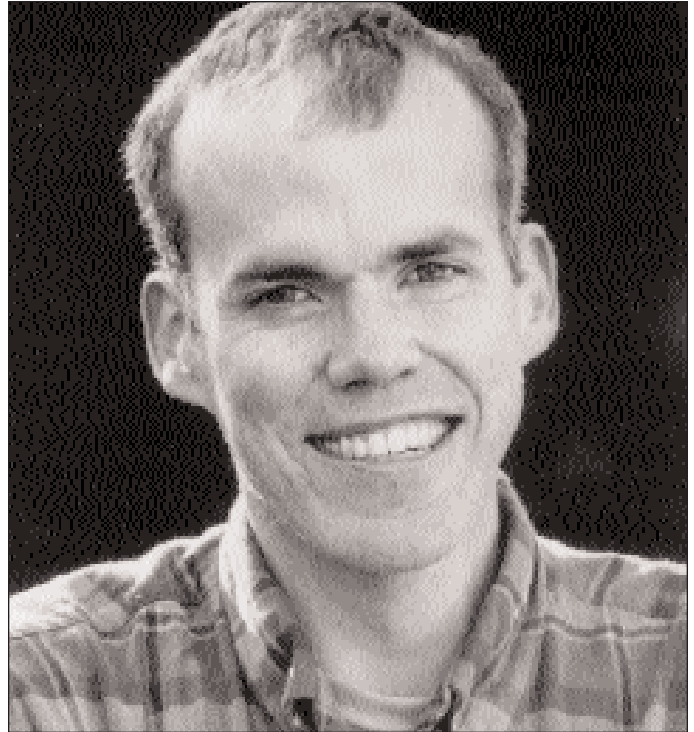
Bill McKibben: Look—human beings have always tinkered with nature. That's us. But in our lifetimes—in a 10 or 15 year period—we're crossing a threshold so quantitatively different that it's qualitatively different as well. A good example, the one I've spent most of my career on, is global warming. We now alter everything on the planet's surface—when you change the temperature, you change rainfall, flora, fauna, windspeed, the course of seasons. In 1980 we didn't do that, and by 2000 we do. And of course genetic engineering is just as striking.

There's a human tendency to think things will happen very slowly over a long period of time and that we will deal with developments as they occur. But, the accelerated speed at which the revolution to engineer life is moving is astounding and a problem if we assume we are keeping up with it. I wrote *The End of Nature* in 1988, which was not particularly long ago, and at that time biotechnologies were still entirely novel. Researchers had just succeeded in producing the so-called "Onco mouse." Six or seven more Onco mice were in a cage some place, but we were still considerably closer to Watson and Crick's discovery of DNA than to today's full-scale manipulation of crops, livestock, or forests. Statistics on the acreage already growing genetically modified crops are just astounding.

During those same twelve years I don't think our ability to think about these things has grown very much at all. With rare exceptions, biotechnologies have not sparked an incredible outpouring of thought from our philosophy departments, our few remaining public intellectuals, our theologians, or anyone else. Though now, perhaps, the public is beginning to take a lead role.

And yet, much of the questioning that is going on is focused on second order cause and effect—issues of safety, efficacy, and rights—rather than questioning what kind of a world is being created.

Yes, it's interesting. I got to think a little bit about this problem in a previous incarnation. During college in the late 1970's and early 1980's, I covered the city of Cambridge and its politics for the *Crimson*. One of the recurring debates, over and over, was on the setting up of some of the earliest biotech labs. All that the politicians examined hearing after hearing and ordinance after ordinance (and some of it actually quite marvelous), were questions of safety. Were super bugs going to escape from the lab and harm Cantabrigians in their sleep? Even then it was clear to me that these were



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not the real issues, that treating genetic engineering simply as a technology—as if it were nuclear power—did not get to the more interesting questions and problems underway.

On the one hand, it's terrific that proponents of genetic technologies are willing to admit there are serious problems, such as world hunger, disease, global warming, species extinctions, and, on the other hand, it's scandalous that none of these problems are posed in terms of root cause.

Right, when you talk to people about genetically modified crops, for instance, you often hear of a virtuous responsibility to "feed the world." It's indisputable that it would be a good thing if we actually fed the billion or so people in the world who are malnourished or dying, or if we came up with



drought resistant plants as global warming kicks in. In fact, there's an infinite list of problems that we have never gotten around to solving because these problems would involve changing the ways in which we behave. Genetic technologies as solutions seem to offer the promise of having a heavier cake and eating it too. Here's how we can solve feeding the world without having to modify what or how much we eat, or how we can continue profiting without sharing our wealth with the rest of the world. We can forget all of those questions because somebody in a lab is going to invent a new miracle rice or super corn and sell it to the people who need it. But having just come from Bangladesh, where I listened to peasant farmers inveigh against the new "golden rice" inoculated with vitamin A, I'm pretty sure these magic solutions won't work any better than the last ones.

I appreciated your observation in The End of Nature that Thoreau went into the woods to redeem man, that "man's desecration of nature worried him less than man's desecration of himself." Will you speak to what we are willing to ignore about ourselves, and how such willful ignorance is tied to desecration?

I think it's clear that the 20th century trashed human nature almost as effectively as wild nature. Take the discussion we were just having, about "magic" technologies. One reason we fall for them is the seductive idea—the idea that these technologies are inevitable, and there's nothing we can do but make the best of them. Behind the idea of inevitability is a view of human nature as predominantly selfish and grasping. It is a view that is certainly to be expected from a world of hyper-consumption, and from our belief that harnessing our grasping, self-centered nature to capitalism is the only way to encourage people to do remarkable and brilliant things. That it's "romantic" and "against our nature" to posit restraint as a solution instead of new technologies. Clearly that dark view of human nature is, in part, true. We all know what self-centeredness feels like, and we all see the many spectacularly powerful results of ambition and ego. But, the notion that these motives and incentives represent the full extent of human nature strikes me as the place the argument turns.

In fact, everyone can conceive of other parts of human nature and experience quite easily. Human beings, at different points in their history, have had different things at the center of their lives. The tribe, the community, God, the natural world, or some amalgamation of these at their cultural center, always imposes certain limits on behavior. There are things you wouldn't do, and humans haven't done, if the

wellbeing of people or the natural world is the most important thing to you or to the health of your community. In fact, it's those other parts of human nature that, ultimately, are the most important aspects of our lives. Very few people lie on their deathbed and wish that they could make another trip to the mall or wish they had spent more time at the office. Instead, we remember those times when we were most open to the world, whether our openness was directed to other people, nature, or both. The times when we were in service to others, or fully exposed to nature in all its glory and uncaring power—those are the moments when we come most fully alive. These are times when a different part—not the grasping or self-centeredness—of our nature takes over. The fact that these experiences or desires are viewed by our society as secondary or unrealistic makes it difficult to fully engage the question of technology and society. People assume that being realistic means admitting only to a grasping, self-centered view of human nature.

A review that appeared in the Atlantic Monthly of How to Make the Body Beautiful, by Holly Brubach, points to another operative view of ourselves. There's a rising phenomenon of middle-class Americans seeking "aesthetic surgeries" which go beyond simple vanities. When people erase years of laughlines, thoughtlines, or squintlines for a younger-looking, less experienced, less expressive face, they think they are becoming more themselves, not less. It seems to me that there's a wholesale rejection of individual experience afoot, which I also see in the zeal to genetically engineer children.

Yes, it's often occurred to me that we live in the last generation where there's going to be people like me, who are kind of funny looking and balding and all of that, and that it's going to be a very strange world when we're gone. In an odd way, it's going to be difficult to know whom to trust. I'm just old enough to have a kind of visceral distrust of people who are getting face lifts and this and that. If we continue on the same path, I guess my kind of attitude will fade quickly as a last-ditch Luddism of

the self. Pretty soon we won't even remember ugly. And the scalpel is one thing, but soon we won't need such crude tools to eliminate the possibility that our skin will age or hair fall out. Soon it might seem absolutely normal to engineer our bodies.

That's why right now we should take a moment to look around and witness the preciousness of the imperfect world we inhabit—we might well be in the last days of so many things, so many ways of being.

The question is, does enough reality remain that we might still break the enchantment of a hyper-consumer soci-

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ety. The only analogy for this enchantment is the kind of spell cast in fairy tales. We are constantly being told what it is we want—more comfort, more convenience, more ease, more stuff.

To live forever.

That's right, immortality, which is a fairytale notion. Whether or not it's possible to break our own incantation strikes me as an extremely open question. There are those who think it will be broken by a physical disaster of some kind. Certainly when we talk about global warming, which is the area I've spent the most time thinking, there are a lot of people who say it will provide a long overdue wake-up call. I don't think there's anything automatic about disaster as a wake-up. I think it's just as likely that a disaster will only heighten our fears and make us all the more prone to try to chant the incantation even louder.

How one snaps that spell is an incredibly important question for whatever we're calling the new kind of politics we're trying to evolve. It is essentially, in many ways, a literary question: What metaphor can come along that is as powerful or more powerful than the kind governing our lives right now? That's what one searches for, tries to figure out. I think your intuition is right that it has something to do with real joy, experienced and expressed, reflected in the crow's feet around one's eyes, as opposed to ersatz pleasure and controlled beauty. How to make that case is hard, and harder all the time, because the deeper we get into that enchanted world the harder it is to remember that there's any way of being outside of it. Which is why the few moments that enchantment seems to lift are so powerful.

It was so great to see Europeans suddenly say last year, But we really don't want to eat this GM crap. In fact they said it more rudely than that, which was correct: Don't shove this crap down our throats. Then at the WTO in Seattle last December, sometimes after inhaling several kinds of teargas, I had the very strong sense—as tears poured out of my eyes—that an important sort of veil was lifting, that people were saying, No, what matters to us are things like sea turtles and ideals like human solidarity. These are the things that make life real and meaningful for us. So one hopes against hope that we can build on these moments of crystal clarity.

In Seattle, there were a lot of people wearing stickers on the backs of their jackets and that said, Wake up Muggles. Have you read the Harry Potter books? Muggles are these people who live in England and can't see that there's this other magical world around, full of wizards and things. I've sort of taken to calling the new movement the "Anti-Muggle Movement" It doesn't have much to do with the old left, which is used to thinking of progressive politics in terms of identity politics and getting everybody fully enmeshed or enrolled in the system. It is, of course, completely and obviously and intuitively necessary that black people and gay people and so forth participate equally in our society, but I think the next step has a lot more to do with figuring out whether the system makes any sense, whether it gives any of us or the living world what is real and meaningful.

I think questions of what constitutes human nature are very important. One of the real tragedies of genetic manipulation is that we should be questioning the idea there's a technological solution to every problem, and we're not. Here we are, at the very moment we can see that our last set of technological solutions altered the very climate of the planet! We are wreaking the most unimaginable changes to the world, changes that people would have dismissed as bizarre science fiction only twenty five years ago. This should be a moment in which we all expect a real critique of our actions. Instead, there's the next group of people in power saying, "Well, don't worry, there's a high-tech way out. We have another escape hatch. We have even more tricks left up our sleeve!"

And I don't know if the greater danger is that they turn out to be right or wrong. Maybe they're right. Maybe they really can use genetic engineering and nanotechnology and all the rest to create for us a comfortable, convenient space station, where all nature is subservient to us, where absolutely everything would be designed for our compliance, convenience, and ease. If they are able to do that, then it really is an end of history.

In my usual, simplistic way, I posed this question in the *End of Nature* with a kind of homely example. When a time comes in twenty-five years or so that we have so many genetically changed and altered rabbits that they've fully interbred with all the other rabbits out there, we have to ask: Does a rabbit then cease to have any more meaning than a Coke bottle? What does it mean to live in a world where everything around us is actually some artifact?

This raises the perilous question of what makes us special, different, *human*. I would argue that it is not our intelligence. That instead our particular gift is the possibility of self-restraint, of not doing things we can do. Altering our genes is easy. Not altering our genes would be tough.

Which requires intelligence of a kind—wisdom.

Yes. If you go back and look at every important religious mystic in our various traditions—eastern or western—the theme of self-restraint is the underlying thread that connects them. If you look at most of our great twentieth century philosophers, the issue of self-restraint also strikes me as the underlying thread. But, self-restraint seems to be the possibility that we may be forever turning our backs on.

If we lose whatever it is in our biology and our culture that makes it at least possible to entertain the idea of self-restraint, then this other view of human nature—the selfish and grasping—may simply triumph forever. That's really what's so strange, or awesome, about the changes that are taking place right now. Changes in the climate are not like other forms of pollution that we might correct and clean up. What our period of activity generated is going to be very visible in the geological record of the planet a million years from now. So too will this revolution of engineering the biological world. It's not like getting a face-lift. It's like making the face-lift permanent for all generations, which represents an ultimate and perhaps permanent triumph of a consumer's view of the world—a view that is perhaps the most uninter-



esting and least satisfying culture in thousands of years. We may be giving that worldview a permanent, *de facto* victory.

It seems to me that one of the problems is that our view of self-restraint usually connotes an inherent deprivation, rather than identifying what one is beholding or enacting that makes restraint automatic and incidental. Acting spontaneously, wisely, is always a choice toward the good and true, not merely away from the bad or wrong, yes?

That's a good way of looking at it. And I should say that what we're talking about, are seeking to identify, are community and nature and love. Without restraint, all those things are easily damaged. We see this kind of call for restraint or resistance from the beginning of the American conservation movement. With people like John Muir, one could really see the assault on things that made life real and good in particular places such as Yosemite Valley. That call for restraint was at the same time a call for an insistence that people could derive great joy and pleasure out of contact with the natural world—out of being uncomfortable, tired, cold, and out in the woods for a long time. There are an awful lot of people who have found just that in the ensuing century. And they're one of the forces that remain the bulwark of the Sierra Club and all the organizations that followed. I'm not sure that particular protest could have happened any other way.

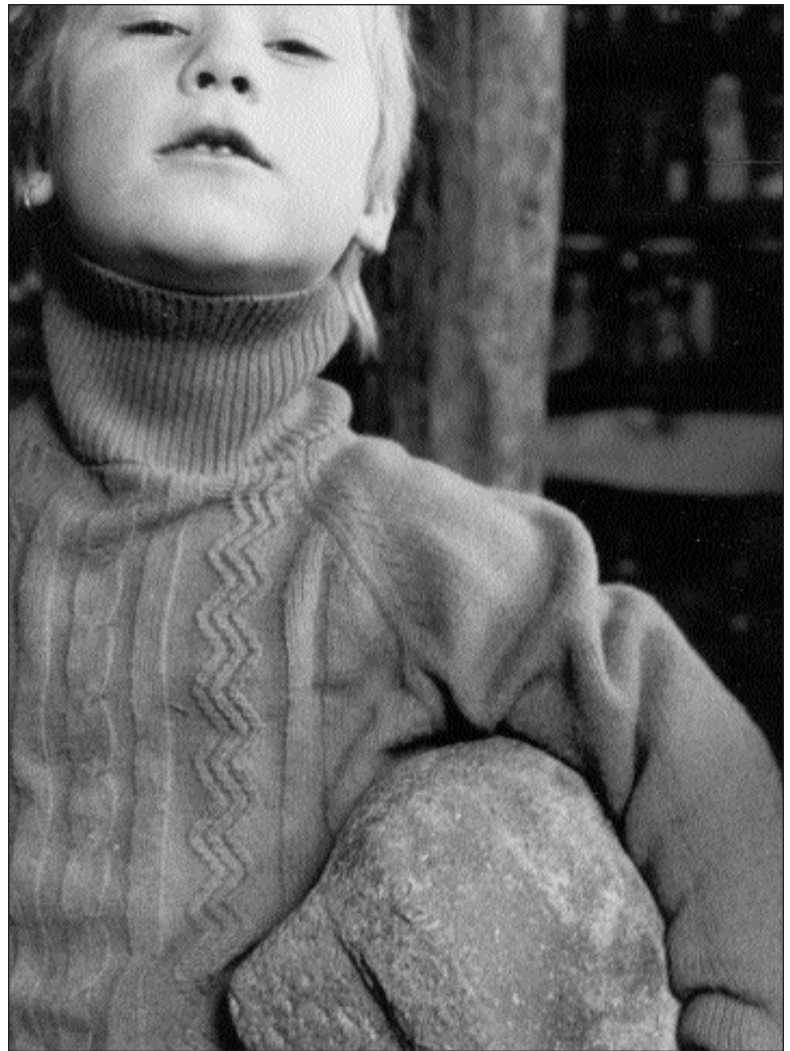
Now I think we're seeing the same kind of recognition spreading across the board, where people feel the acute losses that have occurred in landscapes, communities, and in their personal lives. They feel the absence acutely because they can remember or imagine what a real community or meaningful life and work feels like.

One of the reasons that things like global warming are so tragic is that they make it much harder to imagine what it is you're defending. What does it really mean to talk about wilderness anymore? Or, what will it mean twenty years hence? Progressively less and less. Will a denatured world produce another Muir? Can nature still nurture and inspire us when it *is* us?

It's like trying to love another human being—it's only meaningful if it's them you love, not a them you've tried to make over in your own image, or in the image presented by Hollywood or *Playboy*. This kind of denaturing is proceeding fast in our society too—though here again, at least sometimes, we see resistance growing.

And it better grow fast. Because the more the other view wins out, the more self-reinforcing it becomes; and, the lonelier we get, the easier it is to convince ourselves that what we need to do is acquire more or therapeutically treat or engineer-away our neuroses and anxieties born of alienation.

It's so important to see that the position we've suddenly gotten ourselves and the earth into over the past twenty years—global warming and rampant genetic manipulation—had nothing more than the slightest sort of theoretical exist-



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ence prior to 1980. Now, in 2000 these specters are absolutely full-blown, and, in some ways dominant forces in our economics, our politics, our conception of who we are and where we're going. It's little wonder that we haven't quite figured out how to respond to it all, but we're also unlikely to be given unlimited time to come to do so. One of the correct responses is to be really angry, and that anger explains why it didn't particularly outrage me when someone broke the windows at Planet Hollywood or McDonald's or Nike Town in Seattle. Even though by nature and by conviction I'm a deeply non-violent human being, I think the most alarming observation we can make about human nature, right now, is the deep passivity that is out there. Sometimes I feel it is myself—which is one reason, I think, that I decided to go get arrested in the Capitol this spring, at a demonstration about global warming. Even if we lose, I don't want this moment to pass by unnoticed.

Kundera observed that the end of nature and of poetry will be a silent ending because we've already got our gaze on something else. But, if there's anything natural to any and all of us it's outrage.

Yes, and that's a very good thing. So, please, can we summon it in the next few years?



But it's not our only job. Another of our tasks for the moment is to pay careful attention, to witness what the world is like right now. Even in the best of circumstances, people aren't going to see a world even this intact or diverse, biologically or culturally, for a long time to come. It's incredibly important for those of us who are thinking about these things to create a record, a description that will endure. At one time, I thought of that record only in terms of the physical world, witnessing the vanishing glories of this world. Happily, there's been an amazing blossoming of nature writing. But it also means paying a lot of attention to who we are in the context of nature before we're someone else in a context without nature.

Still, resistance is probably the paramount task. That's what was so great about Seattle. It didn't have anything to do with the precise laws of world trade. It had to do with people saying: "There's something more important on earth than money and I'm ready to lay down on the street and get arrested." (They didn't know at the time that they were volunteering to be shot with rubber bullets and swallow tear-gas.) It was also amazing to watch how instantly power tried to co-opt all that energy. Bill Clinton didn't miss a beat in saying, Well, we can make some changes here and there, in this and that, but of course we don't want to upset the general direction in which we are going. In fact, though, upsetting the general direction is what a lot of people want, and a lot more are going to have to want it if there's going to be real change.

Not that it's easy. The question of how to be subversive in a consumer culture is extremely difficult. It's very hard to be subversive when everything is allowed you.

I've lived deep in the woods most of my adult life and one of the best things about it is that, as long as you don't have a TV, it's still possible to go through days on end without anyone trying to sell you anything. There's some chance that you'll actually hear what your heart is trying to tell you. Aside from all else that's going on, we've perfected distraction to such an art that it's very difficult to perceive anymore. The metaphor I sometimes think of this: We all have a personal kind of broadcast that's coming to our own ears about what it is we really want, what it is that is really satisfying, but that broadcast is coming from inside ourselves at such an extremely low volume that it is easily jammed. Our enormous number of devices—TV, radio, e-mail, videos, or the voices of six hundred magazines—currently overwhelm that signal. But maybe reality in all its actual glory will still break through.

I think it's approaching the time to make statements with our bodies. The life that we know and care about is passing away.

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