

ANNALS OF A WARMING PLANET

MAKING A PLANET WORTH SAVING



By **Bill McKibben**

June 9, 2020



The events of the past few weeks make one wonder: If we're just going to use solar power instead of coal to run the same sad mess of unfair and ugly oppression, is it really worth it? Photograph by Vanessa Charlot /

Redux

Subscribers to The Climate Crisis newsletter received this piece in their in-boxes. [Sign up](#) to receive future installments.

Most weeks, we talk about how to save the world, which seems the only accurate way to put it, given that we've just lived through the hottest May in recorded history and that the carbon-dioxide levels in our atmosphere just hit a new high, unmatched in the past three million years. There are, per usual, dozens of interesting new reports and studies I could tell you about and dozens of dangerous new political developments, right down to the Trump Administration waiving environmental reviews for major projects such as pipelines. (Just no more review—go ahead and build.) But the pain expressed so eloquently in the richest country on Earth these past few weeks can't help but make one wonder: If we're just going to use solar power instead of coal to run the same sad mess of unfair and ugly oppression, is it really worth it? Despite the glad sight of Americans surging into the streets this past weekend—and even with news that the Minneapolis City Council is setting out to dismantle its police department and replace it with something else—I worry that, as with other such moments in the past, this one may slip away without our society really doing the deep work of facing our collective demons.

So I thought it would be worth listening to some of my colleagues at [350.org](#) (a group that I helped found), who, on Thursday night, put together this Webinar. It isn't necessary, of course, to agree with all the views expressed there; if the Webinar doesn't make you uncomfortable in spots, your comfort meter may be pegged too high. But discomfort never killed anyone, not like a knee on the neck or a coal-fired power plant down the street. It features the 350.org activists Thanu Yakupitiyage, Dominique Thomas, Cherrell Brown, Natalia Cardona, Emily Southard, Tianna Arredondo, and Clarissa Brooks, as well as Sam Grant, the executive director of the Minnesota chapter of 350. Their guests are Oluchi Omeoga, who is a Minneapolis organizer with Black Visions Collective, and Lumumba Bandele, the national strategies and partnerships director for Movement for Black Lives.

PASSING THE MIC

Since this is a fairly personal edition of this newsletter, let me say that there is almost no one I like working with more than the Reverend Lennox Yearwood, Jr., who is based in Washington, D.C. We've

been to jail together on several occasions, most recently in January, at the launch of a campaign to keep Chase Bank from funding fossil fuels, and we've worked together in many other ways, because his Hip Hop Caucus has been at the forefront of bringing culture to bear on environmental politics. I remember him addressing people being handcuffed, in Lafayette Square, at the start of the Keystone XL mass protests. "This is the lunch-counter moment for the twenty-first century," he told them. He and his team are currently filming a climate comedy/documentary called "Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave." (See www.Think100Climate.com for more information and a film preview.) My conversation with the Reverend Yearwood, which has been edited for length and clarity, is below.

You've worked hard on police-brutality issues and on climate change. Describe the intersections.

Climate change and police brutality are directly linked together, because the communities who are most impacted and vulnerable to police brutality are also the same communities that are most vulnerable to climate change. We saw this directly in the case of Eric Garner. When Eric Garner was killed in 2014, he stated the same words that we now have heard from George Floyd: "I can't breathe." But one of the things that's important to know about Eric Garner is that he had asthma, as did most people in the Garner family, including his daughter Erica, who would die after suffering an asthma-induced heart attack and a broken heart fighting for justice for her father. Even though Eric Garner was killed by an illegal choke hold by the New York City Police Department, it's important to note that the borough he lived in (which has the highest tree density in N.Y.C.) also received an F for ozone pollution, per the American Lung Association's 2018 report. The way that we can actually fight pollution and police brutality is by fighting them together. I would also add poverty to this deadly mix, because the issues of police brutality, pollution, and poverty are all linked together.

Sixty-eight per cent of black people live within thirty miles of a coal-fired power plant. We know that the destruction of Hurricane Maria, Harvey, Katrina, and Superstorm Sandy all had a direct impact not only on marginalized and vulnerable communities but on communities of color, which reinforces that racial justice and climate justice are linked. But, to be clear, it's all about justice. Which is why the cries of the people of "No Justice, No Peace" are very real.

So the minute that we become serious about fighting police brutality as an environmental movement will be the minute that we begin to have faster gains in fighting climate change and vice versa. Those who are solely focussed on police brutality, the minute they also understand the impact of the climate

crisis and lack of clean air and lack of clean water and those oil companies, gas companies, and coal companies, and how they are directly linked to the poisoning of our communities that we are trying to protect, then they will see that they must take on not only police brutality but also the issue of climate change.

We're coming up on the fifteenth anniversary of Katrina, which was an early chance for Americans to think about the links between race, poverty, and the environment. You've worked hard on relief and recovery in New Orleans. What lessons did that leave you with?

To be honest, our modern-day, twenty-first-century environmental movement is pretty much based on the backs of what happened in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast with Hurricane Katrina. So it's a little disappointing that our movement is still trying to connect the dots. Trying to figure out what racial justice means to climate justice. Our movement is still trying to break the silos. We didn't move fast enough with understanding the issue of racial justice and climate justice after Hurricane Katrina, and in some cases are behind the curve on how we are addressing this issue right now.

On the other hand, while we approach the fifteenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, I am excited to see how, within those past fifteen years, the movement has changed to see more leaders of color in key positions of leadership, groups like Hip Hop Caucus moving to the forefront, and to see young people rising up, doing so many phenomenal things and engaging in the conversation of how we connect the dots of climate justice and racial justice.

Even though it seems to have taken a very long time to get to this point, I am encouraged by seeing large environmental organizations and environmentalists willing to have the conversation about the issues of racial justice and defunding the police. They're calling out white supremacy and institutional racism and posting it on social media. And taking part in protest and talking about it, and not acting like it's taking away from their core mission. They're understanding that they must discuss racial justice and climate justice at the same time, and not act like race is some kind of trip wire for our movement. I'm excited because it feels like we are stepping over the race trip wire at this critical moment. The stakes are clearly high, with the killings of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, but I'm very encouraged at this moment.

I'm also encouraged that white people are not only asking to be allies at this critical time but accomplices in this moral and just fight to end white supremacy. I think 2020 is the year of truth, and I

think that this fifteenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina is a moment that the entire climate movement can get it right. If we do this now, then when we approach the twenty-fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, in 2030, we can say we defeated poverty, pollution, and police brutality in this country.

What a glorious moment that can be!

WARMING UP

The Reverend Yearwood suggested that people might profit from listening to Meek Mill's "[Other Side of America](#)," which was released Friday.



*Bill McKibben is a founder of the grassroots climate campaign [350.org](#) and a contributing writer to *The New Yorker*. He writes *The Climate Crisis*, *The New Yorker's* newsletter on the environment.*

More: [George Floyd](#) [Climate Change](#) [Police Brutality](#) [Social Justice](#)
