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An Interview with Andrew Revkin

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When Andrew Revkin announced in late 2009 that he was leaving his reporting position at the *New York Times* he earned both praise and denunciation. The small but concerted band of climate skeptics contend that Revkin is an alarmist whose reporting has inaccurately conveyed the science of climate. But many in the science community had come to admire Revkin's reporting and felt he was the foremost journalist writing about climate change. The late highly respected Stanford University climate scientist Stephen H. Schneider said: "You have been the most significant person of record on the climate problem for decades." Revkin has had a long career covering science, environment and most recently climate, for *Science Digest*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Discover* magazine and beginning in 1995 for the *New York Times*. He resigned to become a senior fellow at Pace University while continuing with his *Times* blog, Dot Earth. In November, Revkin spoke at the University of Connecticut's Edwin Way Teale Lecture Series. Afterwards, Bob Wyss, an associate professor of journalism and a longtime environmental writer, interviewed Revkin. Here are edited excerpts of that interview.



S. Ebbin

Andrew Revkin

Q - Andy, is there a way to engage the public on climate change, and who is going to do it?

A - I think there is, and it is to get to the root of the story, which is that we don't have the energy menu we need to have a smooth ride in this century as human appetites and numbers crest. We just don't have that and that is non-controversial. For most people, if you talk about energy, you can get a lot of traction and it is a forward-looking situation. We need new energy choices. America, for generations, has been a great innovation engine and it could be again if we get engaged on this.

Q - You are not very optimistic about a political solution. Why are you pessimistic?

A - It is clear that no matter which party runs Congress we are not going to have a serious discussion on Greenhouse Gas restrictions that are powerful enough to shift people on how they invest in energy choices. The politics of coal is really powerful. The problem is that we do not have alternatives that are as cheap as coal. On the international level, I have been watching the treaty talks for literally 20 years and there too I see a lot of talk and not a lot of action. Even where rich countries are obligated to help the poor and vulnerable ones, there is hardly any money that has flowed. You are going to see this ongoing fight between the north and the south and I don't see any action there.

Q - What then is the solution?

A - It has to be a broad stroke and a sense that energy is the new American imperative and that has to be felt from the classroom to the White House to the board room and the laboratory. How you build that sense? I would like to think it could be built by a leader, by a President. That would require a leader willing to jump outside of political advisers. (President Barack) Obama has not shown that willingness so far.

Q - What should scientists be doing about communicating climate change?

A - I think that there is an opportunity and a responsibility for most scientists, who are educators, to build that out a little bit further, to create another ring outside of the classroom. They need to be engaged with the community and perhaps online with a Facebook page or a blog.

Q - It seems as scientists get more involved in public policy issues, their credibility diminishes. There is a risk out there, isn't there?

A - There are risks out there. There are fields of science that are not controversy laden and there are fields that are tough, such as endangered species, energy and climate, where the terrain is trickier, but there are ways for scientists to engage. I think the best way is for scientists to speak about the science that they do in one sentence and to speak about the implications and their feelings about energy and climate in a very different sentence.

Interview with Andrew Revkin continued

Q - Where is the scientific community, is it entering this other ring?

A - Slowly. It is happening.

Q - How would you rate the role of journalism in communicating climate change?

A - It is a tough issue to convey in a newspaper, or on TV, because it is not something that is simple. The risks are not simple, the connections between things are not simple, nor is the energy security angle. Then of course, specialized journalism is imploding. The *Times* was already a refuge for endangered species, meaning science writers within the media, because so many science sections in newspapers have gone away. So that is a big problem.

Q - What were you trying to do in developing your Dot Earth blog?

A - In October 2007, after months of brainstorming with some of our web people, I launched Dot Earth as an ongoing exploration of one question, which is, as we race towards a population of nine billion people, how do we do it with the fewest regrets. That's the framework. It is basically a way for readers to look over my shoulder as I explore questions. I am not spouting, most blogs these days are spouting. I do express my views sometimes, but I also express my view of uncertainty, when things are not clear, and for a chunk of readers, this is a useful thing. What I am thinking is that journalism is going to shift from the old mode of us handing out information from on high. I think the best role for journalists with specialized experience is to serve as a guide, not as a reporter. I feel sometimes like an experienced mountain guide after an avalanche. I have a general sense of where to step and where not to step and what's true and what's false and where the path is but I'm not going to tell you I know for sure. If you follow me, you probably have a decent chance at coming out OK.

Q - And obviously sustainability is an important element of the blog.

A - Yes, I was recently at a meeting of biologists which was called Sustain What? That is always the question. Sustainability as a word is utterly vague until you apply it to a specific issue—sustainable ecosystem, sustainable energy system, sustainable transportation system, sustainable lifestyle. Then you can kind of get an answer. So sustainability is a trait, and not a fact, and yes, that is really what it is all about.

Q - How sustainable is the blog?

A - That's up to the *New York Times* to figure out. I think it is, I think there is a business model for blogs. My readership is several hundred thousand unique visitors every month, which makes it the equivalent of a mid-size magazine. If someone can't figure out how to make money off of that, there is a problem.

Q - As you join this journey to a planet of nine billion people, you have indicated that you are optimistic about the future. Why are you?

A - I am optimistic overall because I see that when people have access to information, once kids have the opportunity to learn, then I have seen explosively flowering potential in humans. There is a guy who is from Zambia that I met at a population conference and he spent three minutes telling me his life story. It started in a rural village where his father sent him into town because he was worried that his kids were all going to die, because he had already lost several. He went to school, he was living with an uncle, and then he went to a university, then he got to a post graduate program and now he is one of the world's leading experts on population and development in Africa. It all happened because his father found a way to get him to a school. Every time I see or hear of something like that, I get excited. We have great innovative potential and there is a great deal of unrealized potential out there, and while there are a number of signs tracking in the wrong direction, there are many going in the right direction. As a UN report that I wrote about recently indicated, poverty is shrinking, education is expanding, fewer kids are dying, and the one thing that is not in that mix is the environment. How do we keep ecosystems thriving? It's a really big deal.

Bob Wyss teaches Journalism at the University of Connecticut. Prior to that, he was a reporter and editor for the *Providence Journal* for 28 years.