

# Dream A



ROBERT E. HANNAN

# Little Dream

## Bill McKibben On Reforming Our Supersized Society

ALEXIS ADAMS

Contrary to what the title of his first book, *The End of Nature* (Random House), might imply, Bill McKibben spends a good deal of time thinking and writing about the future of the natural world. Though he has devoted many pages to the frightening potential consequences of global warming and other environmental threats, he also consistently offers a more hopeful vision. Nature and humanity can coexist harmoniously, he believes, if we make wise, sustainable choices that cultivate the land rather than scar it.

Published in 1989, *The End of Nature* sounded one of the earliest alarms about global warming. It was a bestseller in the United States and has been translated into twenty languages. Since then McKibben has written nine books on topics ranging from overpopulation, in *Maybe One: A Case for Smaller Families* (Penguin), to genetic engineering, in *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age* (Henry Holt).

McKibben's father was a business journalist who served as ombudsman for the *Boston Globe*. The family lived in Lexington, Massachusetts, and through junior high and high school, McKibben worked as a reporter for the *Lexington Minuteman*. In summers he put on a tricorne hat and guided tourists around the Battle Green, site of the 1775 skirmish that marked the start of the American Revolution. The experience left a lasting impression on him, McKibben says. After having told the story, over and over again, of the eight men who died there defending the most basic ideals of democracy, he never confused dissent with a lack of patriotism.

McKibben went on to study at Harvard University, where he served as editor of the campus newspaper. After graduation, he became a whiz-kid staff writer for the *New Yorker*. At twenty-six he quit that job to move with his wife, the writer Sue Halpern, to a rustic cabin in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York, where he wrote *The End of Nature* a year later. McKibben also taught Sunday school and worked on regional conservation issues, and he and his wife had their first — and, by choice, only — child.

The family has since moved to Vermont's Champlain Valley, where McKibben is a scholar-in-residence in environmental studies at Middlebury College, but they still own the cabin. McKibben's latest book, *Wandering Home* (Crown Journeys), chronicles a long walk he took from agrarian, community-oriented Vermont to that cabin in the sparsely populated Adirondacks: a journey from the pastoral to the wild. In the book McKibben visits with Vermont farmers growing crops for local biodiesel use; vintners making wine from grapes specially bred to thrive in the North; and foresters working to promote locally grown and milled wood. In the Adirondacks he crosses rivers and steep ravines and bushwhacks his way through thick stands of timber. At one point he encounters an abandoned farmstead, now dense with forest, a lone apple tree and a cellar the only signs of prior human habitation, and he asks himself, What does it mean for a place to be truly wild?

I first came across McKibben's work when I was an English major and budding environmentalist at the University of Montana in Missoula. I got the chance to meet him a few years later when he spoke at the University of Minnesota. We exchanged stories about Earth First!, a controversial activist organization that I had been involved with in Montana, and that he had observed and researched over the years. When I asked him to sign my book, he wrote, "Earth First! Last! And always!"

I conducted this interview many years later, by telephone: he in his Vermont home in a meadow near the poet Robert Frost's one-time cabin; I on the small Montana farm where I live with my husband and children. Many of the themes we discussed are ones McKibben takes on at length in his upcoming book *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*, due out in early winter from Times Books. When I called, McKibben and his daughter were assembling a pizza using tomatoes and basil from their garden, cheese from a local dairy, flour from a nearby farm, and a few imported Kalamata olives.

Adams: What inspired you to write *The End of Nature*?

**McKibben:** I had just quit my job at the *New Yorker* and moved to the Adirondacks. Land in upstate New York was still cheap then; even an unemployed writer could buy a house. I soon found out that my new home was in the middle of the largest intact wilderness in the eastern United States — a place remarkable not only for its size, but also for the ecological recovery that it had undergone: the entire area had been clear-cut a century before. In many ways it was an ideal place to start thinking and writing about the emerging phenomenon of global warming. My locale helped me understand not only the practical implications, but also the powerful metaphysical, philosophical, and emotional implications of the impending disaster. Most poignant for me was the idea that this wilderness that I was falling in love with wasn't going to stay the same for much longer. The rise in global temperature has put at risk our cold, hard winter: this incredible season when everything becomes vast and graceful and magnificent.

There are more-important reasons to worry about global warming — such as the hundreds of millions of environmental refugees it will create, or the huge percentage of species it will make extinct — but for me, personally, there's also this sense of how sad it will be when these woods are no longer covered in snow for several months out of the year. So the dominant emotion in *The End of Nature* is less fear than it is sadness and grief.

**Adams:** Winter here in Montana has certainly changed a lot since my childhood.

**McKibben:** At our latitude, winter is on average about two to three weeks shorter now than it was in 1970.

**Adams:** You have said that any attempt to deal with climate change will require more than environmentalism as we've known it. What do you mean?

**McKibben:** We've been building this movement for the last 150 years, and it has accomplished marvelous things: the conservation of wilderness; the reduction of pollution in the air and the water. But the movement isn't nearly big enough and strong enough to handle global warming, because climate change arises from the use of fossil fuels, which are at the heart of pretty much every part of modern life. A problem of this size can be tackled only with enormous changes in technology, in the economy, in our behavior, and in our very idea of who we are. That challenge is too big for the Sierra Club to handle. Any effort to solve the problem will have to involve every aspect of human society: churches, businesses, education. Whatever movement emerges to deal with global warming — and hopefully one will soon — is going to owe a debt to environmentalism, but it won't be just an outgrowth of the environmental movement.

**Adams:** It sounds as if you're suggesting it will take a



**BILL MCKIBBEN**

global shift in consciousness.

**McKibben:** Yes, *many* shifts in consciousness. And the most important one will be in this country: whether we're going to continue to be a hyperindividualist society, or return to a stronger sense of community. Unless we figure out how to do the latter, the task of reducing carbon concentrations in the atmosphere, among other things, will be mathematically impossible.

**Adams:** You travel abroad quite often. What do you hear from people in other countries about our nation's refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol on climate change?

**McKibben:** The rest of the world is far more concerned about global warming than our government is. Even the Chinese government at least purports to take the matter seriously. It's shameful. We used to lead the world in environmental concern.

We wrote the Clean Air Act, and then everyone else wrote their own Clean Air Act. We developed the catalytic converter, and then everyone else put them on cars, too. We created national parks, and everyone else followed our lead. Now we're not even the caboose on the train of environmental progress. We're trying to bring the whole thing skidding to a halt.

The mistake that history will hold the current Bush administration most responsible for is not the war in Iraq, which is terrible. No, the biggest mistake is that the White House made no effort to affect China's and India's energy policies during those countries' industrial expansion over the last six or seven years. It would have taken a real commitment of money and resources and time to nudge them in a different direction, but if we had, it would have brought huge benefits fifty years from now. Instead we've just served as their enablers, and they as ours.

The real struggle is to get past the notion of growth as our reason for being, which has dominated our culture since World War II. It's the organizing principle for government policy and most other institutions in our society, including higher education. This is not a tenable model anymore. When you consider global warming, peak oil, and the diverging fortunes of rich and poor nations, it gets harder and harder to maintain this fervent, Alan Greenspan belief that if we continue to increase the size of the system, all will be well. We know now that in terms of human rights, environmental damage, and almost any measure you can name, the endless-growth model has turned out to be a lousy idea. It's remarkably unclear what will replace it. I think the most appealing model — and the one that people are increasingly beginning to converge on, whether they know it or not — is more-durable, smaller-scale, localized economies.

**Adams:** I notice you've replaced the word *sustainable* in your lexicon with *durable*.

**McKibben:** Yes, *sustainability* isn't a particularly compel-

ling word to contrast with *growth*, which is something we all understand. A logical alternative would be *maturity*, because our growth phase is over, and now is the time for the bitter-sweet work of adulthood. Unfortunately, *maturity* has been co-opted by the AARP as a synonym for *retirement*. *Durable* implies something that is going to be around for a long time; it goes against a growth economy in which everything must constantly be replaced.

**Adams:** In your latest book, *Wandering Home*, you discuss to what degree humans should meddle in nature — for example, whether we should assist native species against transplanted invaders, or just decide that nature is whatever it is; that the world is in constant flux, and no real damage can be done to it.

**McKibben:** I think there is no simple answer to that. It's true that there's no such thing as perfect wilderness anymore, and there isn't ever going to be. But to me that makes relatively wild places all the more important, partly for their own sake, and partly to prove that we can actually leave some locales alone. There should also be places that we don't leave alone but take good care of and respect just as highly. The dichotomy between "virgin land" and "raped land" is altogether too apt, I'm afraid, in our culture. We need a category in between the two: a healthy, loving relationship with the land.

**Adams:** Here in Montana there is a rift between activists who are defending the wild and those working to protect family farms and family ranches.

**McKibben:** That rift between pastoral and wild occurs in many places. Here in the Adirondacks we're in the middle of a fight over whether or not to put wind turbines on the edge of the Siamese Ponds Wilderness. There are those who say the turbines would damage the aesthetic of the place, which I understand. But to preserve the beauty of the place in the long run, I think we need to produce local power as part of combating global warming.

**Adams:** Your awareness of global warming came from your experience living in the Adirondacks. Do we all need to move to the woods in order to fully understand the implications of this problem?

**McKibben:** Contact with the natural world is important, but I don't think it's necessary. All that's necessary is contact with *reality* of some kind, and that can come from being a member of a community, rural or urban. Reading the essays of Wendell Berry has taught me the beauty and meaning and significance of human community. I have had to learn this lesson intellectually rather than from experience, because the suburbs in which I grew up didn't teach it.

There are also opportunities for contact with the natural world in cities. When I lived in New York City, I wrote an "urban naturalist" column. I found that Central Park is one of the best bird-watching spots in the world. Birds migrating along the eastern flyway settle down there for the night. New York City is also home to one of the most underutilized national parks in the country: the seashore of Brooklyn. This time of year, there are millions of horseshoe crabs coming out of the water to mate on the beaches — representatives of ancient

The Achilles' heel of consumer society is that it hasn't made us as happy as it promised it would. Although Americans have tripled their prosperity since the mid-1950s, the percentage who say they're "very satisfied" with their lives has declined. . . . We've pursued the American Dream to no real apparent end.

phyla that have remained unchanged for a hundred million years. There's just as much nature to be found in a small park in the center of the city as in a large wilderness in the middle of nowhere. It just takes the eyes to see it.

**Adams:** You've said that the central notion of consumer society is that "each of us is useful precisely to the degree that we consider ourselves the center of everything." Do you think it's possible for Americans to break this habit of putting ourselves at the center?

**McKibben:** I don't think it'll be easy, but I do think it's possible. The Achilles' heel of consumer society is that it hasn't made us as happy as it promised it would. Although Americans have tripled their prosperity since the mid-1950s, the percentage who say they're "very satisfied" with their lives has declined. In fact, only about a quarter of Americans now say that they're "very satisfied." When you think about it, this is pretty sad, considering the unbelievable amount of resources and energy that we have consumed — and waste we have produced — in the last fifty years. We've pursued the American Dream to no real apparent end.

There are signs that we are beginning to wake up to this, however. The number of farmers markets in this country has doubled and then doubled again in the last decade. It's now the fastest-growing part of our food system. Some people shop at them because they understand that you can use ten times less energy by buying local food, but many people shop there because they want food that actually tastes like something, or because they want a connection with the world around them. Sociologists last year studied both supermarkets and farmers markets and found that people had ten times as many conversations at farmers markets. These are not subtle differences:



TUCKER SHARON

ten times less energy and ten times more community — and better food to boot.

**Adams:** You've said, "If there is a pertinent modern question, it is 'How much is enough?'" What answer would you give to that question?

**McKibben:** Less than we have now, for starters. Our addiction to "more" is a psychological relic of our pioneer past.

I've read my daughter all of Laura Ingalls Wilder's novels about American prairie settlers, people who lived lives rich in connection to family, community, and the natural world, but who were impoverished in many other ways.

**Adams:** The children in the books were thrilled to find an orange or a stick of candy in their Christmas stockings.

**McKibben:** Yes, there are incredibly poignant descriptions of them trying to decide whether to eat it all at once or stretch it out for months. In that kind of world, it's easy to see why people wanted more.

I was in China last summer and spent a day in a factory where young people were making shower curtains. It was not Dickensian; most of the workers I talked to thought of the job as a step up. I toured the female workers' dormitories and noticed that a lot of them had stuffed animals on their beds.

**Adams:** How old were the women?

**McKibben:** Eighteen to twenty-two. I remember making small talk with one woman and asking whether she had a stuffed animal. Her eyes welled up with tears, and she told me

no; she really liked stuffed animals, but she sent every penny she earned back home to put her brother through engineering school. Needless to say, I went out and bought her the largest stuffed animal I could find in that corner of China. This made her incredibly happy.

My daughter likes stuffed animals, too, and must have seventy-five little Beanie Babies in her room. Though she's perfectly happy to get one more, it has what economists would call "low marginal utility." One more, in her case, is a remarkably small gift.

Like her, we're long past the point where *more* is doing us any good. A number of years ago I ran a project through the local Methodist church called "Hundred Dollar Holiday." (I eventually wrote a book by that title [Simon & Schuster].) We tried to get people to change the way they celebrated Christmas by spending only a hundred dollars per family — about one-tenth the American average — and giving gifts of service instead. It was a remarkable success. We were doing it because we wanted to save the environment — less wrapping paper and batteries and so on — but we also discovered that most of us are desperately sick of the way Christmas is celebrated. People were grateful for permission to use Christmas instead as a time for family, for community, for being out in the natural world, and for reflection.

*(end of excerpt)*