



Book Getting Green Done

Hard Truths from the Front Lines of the Sustainability Revolution

Auden Schendler
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Recommendation

Auden Schendler serves as the sustainability director of the Aspen Skiing Company, which operates the Aspen/Snowmass resort complex in Colorado. He discusses his successes and failures in promoting sustainability to illustrate the lessons he has learned. Proving refreshingly open, Schendler criticizes his colleagues, including his previous CEO, who told Schendler he could introduce a green initiative only “over my dead body.” Schendler calls for transparency and an end to greenwashing, demanding that corporations, nonprofit organizations, and governmental bodies clarify which sustainability projects work and which do not, and pursue the ones that make a difference. *BooksInShort* recommends this valuable guide to executives, government leaders and concerned citizens who want to take meaningful action against global warming.

Take-Aways

- The world must act immediately to mitigate the effects of global warming.
- Corporations spend millions convincing the public that climate change does not exist.
- Sustainability is difficult and requires enduring long-term effort.
- Individual efforts, like driving a hybrid car, are admirable but insignificant in light of the enormous overall climate change problem caused by greenhouse gas emissions.
- Education programs that instruct people to take individual actions – like turning off extra lights – focus responsibility away from the real problem.
- Buildings are a prime source of carbon dioxide emissions, but existing technology can make most structures more efficient.
- Business cannot solve global warming all by itself, but it can push government to institute change.
- Corporations should implement their own solutions.
- Commence a green project that will save money or improve operations.
- Climate change requires transparency about what works and what doesn’t.

Summary

Losing the World

Global warming is serious. In 2007, the Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that the world’s nations must immediately institute practices to reduce greenhouse gases. Otherwise, Earth will experience a catastrophic climactic disaster. Rajendra Pachauri, head of the IPCC, said, “If there’s no action before 2012, that’s too late.”

“Climate change is a threat the likes of which our society has never seen.”

Unless countries immediately curtail global warming, expect to see island nations under water, a 50% reduction in African food crops and a 5% drop in global gross domestic product (GDP). The IPCC's November 2007 report, which 140 nations, including China and the US, endorse, documents the scientific community's conclusion that global warming is real, ongoing, and man-made. The American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Academy of Sciences and the scientific academies of every G-8 nation support this contention.

“It's fine for people to buy a Prius and use canvas bags at the supermarket, but we can't afford the delusion that such individual action is enough.”

Corporate propaganda that denies global warming may be one cause of ordinary citizens' apparent lack of concern about the environment. As writer Paul Hawken said, if you read reports on global warming and you are not anxious, you are looking at incorrect data. Many people who worry about the climate act as if green behavior – driving a hybrid car or using cloth grocery bags – will make a difference. While admirable, these are just tiny steps in the right direction. The change that matters most is a dramatic reduction of carbon dioxide emissions.

“We are cannibalizing the climate we depend on to stay in business, eating our own tail to stay alive.”

Even with the most concerted efforts, global warming will continue at dangerous levels. According to Joe Romm, author of *Hell and High Water*, if the nations of the world could keep carbon dioxide emissions at 2010 levels for 50 years, and decrease emissions from 2061 onward, the atmospheric level of carbon dioxide would remain at 550 parts per million (ppm). Holding at even this state would raise global temperature at least 1.5°C [2.7°F]. This may seem small, but the Earth is very delicate: The ice ages came about due to a temperature change of approximately 6°C [10.8°F].

Greenwashing

Many business leaders exaggerate their miniscule efforts to address global warming. Companies often falsely present themselves as green champions, a public relations ploy known as greenwashing. Many corporations oppose gasoline taxes, improved fuel efficiency standards and climate-protection legislation. Currently, numerous companies practice little sustainability. Some are even going backward. Suncor once enjoyed the most admirable sustainability record in the oil industry. Now it is a player in the Alberta tar sands project, one of the globe's supremely dangerous environmental catastrophes. Companies that make a real effort to mitigate global warming include General Electric, Walmart, DuPont and Patagonia.

Changing Daily Practices

Creating a sustainable world will be immensely difficult, even at the grassroots level. For example, author Auden Schendler struggled to get workers at the Aspen Skiing Company to stop using a dangerous, solvent-based mechanical parts washer in favor of a cheaper, water-based alternative that did not create hazardous waste, did not require submitting regulatory forms and did not damage the health of the machine's operators. The new, eco-friendly, safer machine would pay for itself in 18 months.

“We live in an energy-based society: We swim in energy like fish in water, and we're equally unaware of it.”

At first, the new system did not work. “This thing is slow,” a company mechanic reported. “It leaves a white filmy residue. It sounds like a heavy-metal drummer. What can you do about it?” Schendler researched different soap products. He spoke to numerous repairmen. At last, an electrician discovered that a motor had been installed incorrectly. When he fixed the problem, the machine worked perfectly.

“Business is always going to default to profit at the expense of the atmosphere because it costs nothing to pollute.”

This project would have floundered at the Aspen Skiing Company – a firm dedicated to responsible environmentalism – if not for the insight of a single worker. Such a failure would have made all the company's future sustainability projects seem suspect, lending credence to the widespread idea that green products and solutions are inefficient. Few sustainability efforts unfold easily. Considering the stakes involved, proponents must move ahead, undeterred.

One Illustrative Battle

When Schendler first became the Aspen Skiing Company's sustainability director, he focused on the Little Nell Hotel – where rooms cost \$500-\$5,000 nightly – for environmental improvement. Schendler sought to retrofit all 90 of the hotel's rooms with fluorescent light bulbs, a move that would have a 100% return on investment in energy savings. The Nell's manager opposed him because he regarded fluorescent lighting as too blue-hued and downscale for the prestigious Nell.

“The act of pursuing sustainable solutions is noble; to cover up the mistakes is criminal.”

Schendler then suggested replacing 110 inefficient, constantly burning 175-watt electric lights in the Nell's garage with linear fluorescents. This would save \$10,000 annually after the initial \$20,000 purchase, cut greenhouse gas emissions, provide better light and cut maintenance time in half. Again, the manager said no. If he had to spend \$20,000, he'd rather buy fine bed sheets with high thread counts. Upper level managers also scoffed at Schendler's data. The retrofit went ahead only after the Nell won a local green incentive grant and the company's CEO intervened.

“Relying solely on corporate, or individual, voluntary emissions reduction measures to start this revolution is like asking everyone on a becalmed boat to blow toward the sail.”

Schendler's experience as an executive at the Aspen Skiing Company, which operates numerous resort buildings, is doubly instructive. According to architect Ed Mazria, buildings account for nearly half of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. The US has more than 130 billion buildings, and most of them are energy inefficient. The average US home spews 26,000 pounds [almost 12,000 kg] of greenhouse gases annually. Owners can retrofit their homes to be 50%-95% more energy efficient, and new buildings can be “net energy generators.”

Actions, Not Words

No one needs more white papers, environmental analysis reports, ineffective government programs or announcements of ambitious initiatives that sputter. Instead of taking difficult action to make a real change, governments and corporations promulgate education programs that instruct people to take individual actions – like turning off extra lights – because such undertakings focus responsibility away from the real problem. The only solution is for government and business to address climate change in harmony.

“Greenland and Antarctica are melting one hundred years ahead of schedule.”

Their focus must be on tangible actions. Leaders in both sectors need to act immediately. So, who goes first – business or government? Mitigating climate change requires government intervention. But business leaders, with their ability to lobby officials at the highest levels of power, can force government to act. Business leaders must develop their own showcase sustainability projects to establish environmental credibility. To begin, follow these five steps for your company’s sustainability project:

1. **“Do a sexy project”** – Don’t start by addressing issues of corporate culture. Commence a green project that will save money or improve operations.
2. **“Make the economic pitch”** – Stress all the economic, public relations and other benefits that will accrue from your sustainability project. These can include cost savings, energy efficiency, better community relations, brand differentiation, improved employee retention, long-range strategic gains and ethical imperatives.
3. **“Cement the program”** – Be creative about ensuring that your sustainability efforts will endure. As environmental affairs departments develop specialized expertise, they can become new profit centers by offering consulting services to other firms that need advice on environmental projects.
4. **“Establish partnerships”** – Be resourceful about seeking and securing green programming grants from nonprofit groups, government agencies, and others, especially for projects that offer environmental benefits but do not reduce spending.
5. **“Hype your success”** – Publicize green programs that succeed. Give management full credit to encourage them to champion future programs.

“Negawatts”

Amory Lovins, founder of the prestigious Rocky Mountain Institute think tank, coined the term “negawatts,” to denote energy savings derived from increased efficiency. Praise the tangible benefit of negawatts to your senior managers. Ask them to lobby their government representatives. Negawatt profits can facilitate moving from old dirty energy to new clean energy.

Renewable Energy Certificates

In contrast, purchasing renewable energy certificates (RECs) may be ineffective. A REC is a proxy for energy, in that it “represents the environmental attributes” the electricity it takes to “run an average American home for a month,” that is, one megawatt-hour. When you buy a REC, you subsidize production of low-emission electricity but – contrary to common perceptions – you don’t literally offset your use of dirty energy.

“Implementing the kind of change that will solve global warming is a slow, grueling process.”

Even so, RECs are “the most obvious and accessible way” to buy green power today. They allow firms to keep their destructive environmental policies while claiming to purchase “100% clean power.” However, “not all RECs are equal”: “Forward RECs” offer genuine benefits. They are costly, and you must buy them over the long term, but they can subsidize worthy projects, like the development of wind-power farms. Community Energy and Native Energy are two reputable forward REC retailers.

Change Now

Potential technological advances will not solve the climate problem. The Earth cannot afford to wait for such developments, which may never appear. Some strategists advise their political clients to feign interest in future technology as the answer to global warming. By advocating nonexistent solutions, these “climate delayers” burnish their images as temperatures increase, the ice caps melt and the seas rise. James Hansen, director of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, says that, unless people act during the next decade, their descendants will be living on a planet that current inhabitants would not recognize. “It may seem impossible to imagine that a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself, but that is what we are now in the process of doing,” writes Elizabeth Kolbert in *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*.

Transparency

Citizens must learn from their governments’ and industries’ inevitable policy and technological mistakes, and they must be wary of all public relations claims of sustainability advances. Corporations, nonprofit organizations and governments must be honest about how difficult it will be to achieve sustainability. Rosy predictions only raise false hopes that won’t survive the first sign of trouble – and there will be trouble.

“We need to act now or we risk destroying life on Earth as we know it.”

Case in point: The well-known green architect William McDonough used to tell audiences that the Lewis Center at Oberlin College, which he designed, was an efficient model of sustainability. It was not. In fact, the Lewis Center burned more energy than equivalent nongreen structures. McDonough’s claims, however, enhanced his reputation for a time. Such obfuscation makes it difficult for the building industry to learn from its mistakes. McDonough’s deception empowers those who attack the credibility of advocates who actually make a difference.

Walmart’s Worthy Candor

Even though Walmart spends half a billion dollars each year on sustainability projects, its 2007 sustainability report stated that its carbon dioxide emissions increased, on average, by 8.6% during the two previous years. Sustainability is not easy or inexpensive. Sustainable initiatives represent a new approach. People always fight and

resist new ways, but companies, organizations, and individuals must persevere. Preserving a sustainable world for generations yet to come is of utmost importance. If the world's nations don't deal with global warming, time will run out. The future of the planet hangs in the balance.

About the Author

Auden Schendler is the executive director of sustainability at the Aspen Skiing Company. In 2006, *Time* magazine chose him as a “global warming innovator.” Schendler has summited Alaska’s Mount Denali. His work has appeared in the *Harvard Business Review*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Rock and Ice* magazine.
