

What Exactly Do I Stand For

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My View:

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A neighbor contacted me not long ago for an assignment requiring him to ask an environmentalist a set of questions. The questions made me really think about myself, my concerns, and my involvements. I hope my answers are a worthwhile read over your morning coffee or before you turn off the lights. It is certainly a worthwhile exercise to consider yourself and your actions in light of a label that someone applies to you.

Q: When did you first consider yourself an environmentalist?

A: About eight years ago, I called Durham's planning department to ask why all the trees across the street (Barbee) from Fairfield (my neighborhood in South Durham) had disappeared overnight (literally). Soon the entire area looked like it was being excavated for ore. After several frustrating conversations, I told them they should be called the "planned" rather than the "planning" department, but I learned that it's too late to seek information/ input when the first tree is marked for removal. I asked to be notified about every rezoning application submitted in Durham (though one can indicate far lesser areas for notification), and I started paying attention to the re-zoning signs along the roads.

Q: What would be a good way to end the push for off-shore drilling?

A: Incessantly demand the removal of all tax breaks for oil and gas companies and invest the resulting funds in solar and wind power, primarily the former. It is ridiculous that we are not using this free, non-polluting and readily available source of energy (the sun) that is increasingly forcing our retreat into air-conditioned buildings and stressing our water sources in summer. In addition, if we used the sun's energy as trees do, local temperatures would decrease, greatly improving our quality of life during hot weeks. Australia has been using solar energy in outback homes for decades, but we refuse (or are inhibited by corporate America's governmental influence) to do so.

Q: What would be a good way to get young people (elementary through high school age) involved in environmental issues?

A: Incorporate in-the-field environmental science into traditional biology and chemistry at every school. For instance, rather than using labs/ tools bought from educational retail sources (or protocols in use since I was a kid), students should determine the pH, acidity,

nitrates and phosphates of the nearest water available (even if it's just a large puddle after a good rain) and compare it to the EPA's "healthy levels." Not only would such assignments be more engaging and instructional, funding for curricula like this is available through retailers (Target, Whole Foods, WRAL, etc.) or from local (Keep Durham Beautiful), state (via the Soil and Water Conservation District) and federal sources. Classrooms and schools should involve local streamwatch organizations (Ellerbe Creek Streamwatch, Haw River Assembly, Eno River Association, Northeast Creek Streamwatch, etc.) or local wildlife organizations (Piedmont Wildlife Center, for example), which already host numerous related educational events (and camps) throughout the year, many free of charge.

Q: What do you consider to be the most pressing environmental challenges today?

A: Water quality. Oil companies use clean water to produce oil, while local waterways (Jordan, Falls and many others U.S.-wide) are federally impaired and contain contaminants that will harm our health in the long (and even short) run. Currently, about 40 percent of people worldwide don't have access to clean water, including 15 percent of Latin America. The Population Institute says global demand for fresh water already exceeds supply by 17 percent. While no one complains about the rising price of water, even though it costs twice as much as gasoline, it's no coincidence that many big oil companies are investing in water, known on the stock market as "blue gold." According to Fortune magazine: "Water is one of the great business opportunities. Water promises to be to the 21st century what oil was to the 20th century: the precious commodity that determines the wealth of nations."

Q: What change(s) would you make in your local community with regard to the environment?

A: 1) Do a comprehensive investigation of all sewer pipes throughout Durham, identify leaks/weak spots (there are many and they smell), and fix them ASAP. 2) No fracking – period. 3) Prohibit the ground/fertilizer application of sludge (human/sewer waste) or any product containing sludge (many are on the shelves now). 4) Demand that counties be allowed to prohibit developers from "paying to pollute"; currently they can (and do) buy increases in pollutant levels (allowed to run off their completed projects) by paying farmers upstream to leave trees/buffers around their creeks/streams/etc. and to keep livestock out of these areas – farmers should be required to do this anyway. 5) Demand (repeatedly) an end to offshore drilling. 6) Rebates and/or tax breaks for those who purchase rainwater-storing cisterns, solar roofing/water heaters/etc. (Durham government is already providing rebates/refunds for low-flow toilets purchased for Durham homes.) 6) Require that all construction/development contains impervious surfaces (roads, roofs, etc.) of only 25 percent within a ½-1-mile radius of rivers and lakes and of only 50 percent within a ½-1-mile radius of perennial streams. 6) Demand no tax breaks (local, state or federal) for companies related to the drilling, production and supply of oil, gas or fossil fuels.

Q: The biggest concern in my personal sphere?

A: The influence of environmentally irresponsible development practices on our water

quality. These include clear-cutting large swaths of trees, removing topsoil (often sold), mass-grading the remaining clay (rendering it as impervious as a landfill), and saving very little existing forest/vegetation (especially in low-income areas). Plants need nitrogen and phosphorous to survive, so this vegetation filters (naturally and for free) our stormwater (which eventually becomes drinking water). “Modern” development practices replace this natural vegetation with far less effective lawns or seedlings, often excessively applying fertilizers that contain high levels of nitrogen and phosphorous (among other undesirables) and, thus, exacerbating the problem.

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