

Opinion: Young environmentalists approach the world differently

By Ben Goldfarb

The generation of young people now entering the workforce – call us Millennials, or Gen Y, or the Vast Unemployed – has a very different relationship with environmentalism than our forebears did. The stereotype of the conservationist hurling himself between the whale and the harpoon is increasingly anachronistic and so too is the image of courageous litigators taking down evil polluters.

For better or worse, the modern environmentalist is more likely to partner with a chemical company than prosecute one.

It is true that alliances between environmental groups and corporations can benefit both the planet and companies' bottom lines. Yet all too often, these partnerships serve to facilitate greenwashing and conceal destructive corporate behavior.

The challenge that the next generation of sustainability leaders face is to make sure that green business partnerships are genuine, that they are more than PR stunts.

We recognize that trying to tackle environmental problems without directly engaging private industry is probably folly – not to mention bad politics. However, despite having lived our lives with the consequences of corporate recklessness and unbridled consumption, we have capitulated to the system, in a sense: rather than trying to overthrow it, we increasingly elect to work within it.

So how does a cadre of young idealists bent on social change

infiltrate companies who are deeply invested in the status quo? The same way any agent penetrates any institution: we need disguises.

In 2008, Tommy Hayes was working for Environmental Entrepreneurs (E2), a national network of sustainable business leaders, when the economy hit the skids. “Overnight, the only salient conversations in DC were about jobs,” Hayes remembers.

“And the business leaders had much better credentials than the strict environmentalists – their arguments were smarter, punchier. They had better insight into how money moves and motivates.”

Hayes recalls telling himself that that was how the game worked and that’s how he was going to play it.

Hayes, now 28, is a joint-degree student at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and the Yale School of Management. Because of his scientific background, business school didn’t come naturally, he says, but moving away from his comfort zone was the whole point. “I can’t exactly throw open a company’s books and tell you what it all means, but now I can speak the lingo – and that makes a huge difference,” he says.

Given that the phrase “young environmentalist” is synonymous with “naïve” in many minds, using the right lexicon is crucial to avoiding quick dismissal.

I’ve observed a similar dynamic in 350.org’s Do The Math campaign, aimed at convincing universities to divest from fossil fuel companies. While the forebears of these activists would have been chaining themselves to condemned trees, modern crusaders have an intimate knowledge of their schools’ investment portfolios and speak the language of investor responsibility and rates of returns.

Divestment activists are no less passionate than their

predecessors, but they're more clinical; their weapon of choice is the 20-page report and the movement of money.

Of course, the ability to talk the talk means a lot more when it's accompanied by real expertise. Charissa Rujanavech, also a Yale master's student, abandoned a nascent career in conservation biology to pursue corporate sustainability after she decided that safeguarding wildlife populations was too small-scale to meet the environmental challenges at hand.

Rujanavech, 26, now studies life-cycle analysis, which charts the environmental impact of the materials that go into the creation of a product and beyond, and translated her new skills into an internship in the sustainability department of a major athletic company.

"When you manufacture a million shoes a day," Rujanavech says, "you can make a small change in how much water or toxics go into a product and still have a huge impact."

But convincing a company to make even a small change is no easy matter. After all, large corporations have been wildly profitable since long before the entry of green business principles into the mainstream. I've spoken with several people who have worked in corporate sustainability and, after their ideas were routinely and summarily rejected, came to realize that their department served as its de facto public relations.

That's why tomorrow's sustainability leaders will have to be as effective at communicating their message to those higher-up in the company (and the public) as they are at crunching numbers.

Plenty of green industries and industrial techniques rely on new, esoteric business models and processes. "You need to tell a powerful story to explain how these things work," says Bonnie Frye-Hemphill, who at 26 is already a clean-tech veteran. "People already know what Chevron does. But how do

you explain what, say, Solar Mosaic does in a clear and compelling way?"

Similarly, Hayes says that business school has served as an informal crash course in psychology, one that's helped him reframe environmental concepts in terms that appeal to business minds.

In this fiscal climate, an even greater challenge than communicating big ideas is finding money for them. Many green initiatives are turning away from traditional funding sources – government grants and subsidies and NGO money – and toward crowd-funding. Solar Mosaic uses online contributions to put solar panels on buildings and then pays back investors (with interest) through energy savings.

A New York-based startup called ioby crowd-funds projects like community gardens and street beautification, while sites like RocketHub and Petri Dish solicit funding for scientific and environmental research. Navigating and exploiting these platforms is already a requisite skill for environmental leaders.

Yet no matter how thoroughly young environmentalists manage to integrate themselves into the corporate world, it is imperative that they remain, on some level, removed from it.

"Businesses have been allowed to operate in destructive ways for years," says Hayes. "I feel comfortable telling them to shape up."

For every company that voluntarily embraces green principles, there are five more that have to be shoved toward sustainability, and would happily cut corners if too-credulous environmentalists allow it.

Our generation may not feel antagonism toward private industry, but it's essential that we retain a healthy skepticism of its motivations.

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