

# Q&A with Paul Hawken



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*Paul Hawken is an environmentalist and entrepreneur who founded the Erewhon Trading Company for natural foods and the Smith & Hawken garden supply company. He also is a best-selling author whose books—which include *Next Economy* (1983), *Growing a Business* (1987), *Ecology of Commerce* (1998), and *Natural Capitalism with Amory Lovins* (1999)—have been published in over 50 countries and in several dozen languages. His latest, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came Into Being*, and *Why No One Saw it Coming*, examines the thousands of worldwide organizations dedicated to greater environmental protections and social justice.*

**Your Web site, [www.paulhawken.com](http://www.paulhawken.com), says that since age 20 you have “dedicated your life to sustainability and to changing the relationship between business and the environment.” Why did you embrace this life cause at such an early age?**

At age 20, I started my first company, and its purpose was to develop sustainable methods of agriculture and cultivate a market for the products. It is called the natural foods movement now, but at the time, it was not so clearly defined.

At that time, the U.S. food system had reached a low point. The chairman of the Department of Nutrition at Harvard, Fred Stare, promoted sugar, canned foods, and chemical additives, and sat on the board of companies that encouraged dietary habits that lead to obesity, Type 2 diabetes, and heart disease.

It was a time in America when there was a gleeful disconnection from material life and nature. Food, real estate, transportation, and commerce itself were not viewed from a systemic point of view, but as autonomous economic sectors that could transcend natural limits.

Maybe it was the formative years I spent in the Sierra Nevadas. Maybe it was growing up in California and seeing development destroy places I loved—places where one night there were frogs and mockingbirds and the next day bulldozers. But whatever it was, from early on the disconnect between nature and business was obvious, and I have spent my life addressing it.

**In the past year, corporate America seems to have embraced sustainability as a correct—and profitable—strategy. When did you sense this shift in attitudes?**

As far as I can tell—and my evidence is purely anecdotal—something shifted just over two years ago. I could tell because of who was calling me and what they were saying. Companies and CEOs that you would not associate with any environmental awareness began to make inquiries that were serious, top-level explorations of the future.

This was a very different response than the defensive greenwashing that was often seen in the 1990s. The obvious case study is Wal-Mart, the largest company in the world. Even their most dogged critics believe their commitment to the environment is the real deal, and they would be right.

**Is corporate America’s embrace of sustainability genuine, or does the depth of commitment differ from company to company?**

That still depends on the company, and to a large extent on the values of the CEO and his or her relationship with the board of directors. When you are responsible for a huge pile of assets and brand equity, you get understandably cautious and conservative. And despite the fact that commerce benefits from rapid change, most companies resist it in the belief that will protect them.

In the past, the environment was seen as a secondary issue that could be put off into the future. However, if you are management, your responsibility is to plan for the future. And one by one leaders in business are coming to realize that business as usual will lead to ecological chaos and, thus, economic ruin, and that to be a responsible business requires a strategy that incorporates both environmental uncertainty as well as environmental restoration. In short, understanding the environment and transforming the company’s relationship to it have become fiduciary duties. And, of course, once you understand that, you get the prize in the Cracker Jack box: moving toward a sustainable world is the most exciting, innovative opportunity that has come along since the advent of the industrial age.

**Do commercial developers and investors “get it,” or, again, does it differ from company to company?**

It differs vastly, not only from company to company, but also country to country.

There are some outstanding developers like Joe Van Belleghem in Victoria, British Columbia, and John Knott of Noisette in Charleston, South Carolina, who are pretty much knocking the cover off the ball in their work. Development always faces a capex versus opex dilemma: the profit motive combined with market forces favors minimum capital expenditures—always a detriment to green development. True ecological development requires a leader and a team that approach the development with dogged attention. These upfront planning costs pay off because when you get it right, the higher costs can be lessened and the higher value is manifestly apparent to buyers.

### **What about the big mass-market developers who construct the vast majority of U.S. housing?**

I am not as familiar with this sector, but I think it is evident that the residential housing industry is bringing up the rear. People are struggling to buy into a very expensive real estate market, and the exigencies of the market require cost control and rapid turnaround once construction commences. Current lending practices rarely factor in reduced energy and water use as part of overall ownership cost and thus discount the value of solar panels on the supply side and energy-saving technologies on the demand side.

This is a shame because the vast majority of the nearly 2 million new houses built every year will become white elephants—homes that will need extensive retrofitting to adapt to a carbon-constrained future. Money saved in purchase price will come back to haunt owners later. Just as we should be building fleets of plug-in hybrid electric vehicles that will get 400 miles per gallon [167 km per liter] in order to address energy costs and national security, we should be doing the same in the housing market—building highly efficient, carbon-sipping homes. Instead, we are building the residential equivalent of Lincoln Navigators and Hummers.

### **How can we really have an economy and society that values sustainability when sprawl gobbles up greenfield land and creates a lifestyle of driving everywhere?**

We either have concentrated areas of people in cities, towns, or villages, and a viable countryside, or we don't. Sprawl doesn't fit on the landscape of a viable, sustainable future.

We are building future ghost strips, and they eventually will be abandoned for two reasons: they will be too expensive to get to, and second, intelligent developers are creating residential/commercial centers that favor pedestrians rather than Detroit. And this is what people do—and will—want. It doesn't mean suburbia can't be retrofitted. It can.

One trend that has been overlooked is localization. There is a rapidly growing movement to shorten the distance between sup-

ply and demand on almost every level, from food to fuel.

We cannot afford a rapidly growing global economy because it is extraordinarily wasteful of energy, resources, and even people. We are moving toward locally sourced food, power generation, fuels, transport systems, and even currencies.

### **What are the major roadblocks to the mainstreaming of sustainable principles?**

The most effective thing we can do is to look at what is preventing sustainability. One of the obstacles is cost and price. The federal government provides considerable subsidies to the carbon fuel industry but whipsaws the renewable energy industry with on-again, off-again incentives.

I do not see the Iraq war as an ideological contest, but as an oil war. We simply would not be there were it not for the oil fields in and around the country. The eventual cost of the war is projected now to exceed \$1 trillion. For that amount of money, we could have provided the incentives to the business community to completely transform the automobile fleet to plug-in hybrid electric vehicles getting hundreds of miles per gallon powered by 10 million new wind turbines largely placed in the Midwest benefiting farmers and Native American populations. We could have provided the means and incentives for coal-fired utilities to employ technologies to sequester carbon from their stacks.

We could have altered the economics of homeownership to favor sustainable materials and renewable energy. And finally, we could have provided the incentives to ensure that every building constructed would be carbon neutral within 15 years. This would have provided a million dignified family-wage jobs and boosted our economy, security, and, no doubt, our self-respect.

Thus, the major roadblock to sustainability is ourselves. Sustainability is much talked about but little practiced. When I was photographed for the *Vanity Fair* green issue in

2006, they flew in a photographer from London to San Francisco, rented an 11-passenger van with driver that held six other people flown in from New York to assist the photographer, including a makeup artist, even though no makeup was required as I leaned against a tree in the woods by my house. And during the whole shoot, the driver sat in the van with the motor idling.

The media are presenting greening as the new black, which is fine, but what we are talking about is a cultural change that comes about as a result of deep reflection about values, community, and identity. One of the real breakthroughs is occurring in the religious community, which increasingly sees sustainability as a way to express care for the sacredness of life.

Another large obstacle is business. Our government is corrupted by money, and overwhelmingly the money comes from business or people made wealthy by business. This skews the electoral process, decision making, and the exercise of power. Just as we enshrined a necessary separation of church and state in our constitution, we need a separation of business and state. Government needs to stop politicizing science, which goes back to governmental corruption.

In order to solve problems, you need good data and good diagnosis. This cannot be done when science advisers who once lobbied for ExxonMobil are redlining drafts of federal studies on climate change. I believe business is now taking a leading role in creating a sustainable future. It is time for business to take a role in cleaning up its relationship to governance. This requires leadership.

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