

## Northwest E3 Summit

### Keynote by Bill Dietrich

Welcome to God's Country.

I don't mean that in a religious sense – we've far too much religious politics already, in my humble opinion – but rather as a spiritual greeting. Northwest Washington – San Juan, Skagit, and Whatcom counties – has one of those geographies so beautiful, so moody, so varied, and so powerful that it serves as a gate, a station platform, for the mystical. It confirms our suspicion that there is more to life than everyday survival. It reinforces our hunch that there is a reality deeper than what we commonly see. This has nothing to do with religious dogma. It has everything to do with finding meaning beyond materialism, and serenity beyond sensation. The sea and land, from the scattered emeralds of the San Juan Islands to the crystal crest of the Cascades, is surely a place where gods dwell, pixies cavort, mermaids swim, and trolls brood under piles of mossy boulders. Bald eagles have anointed it. Herons stand sentry. To conserve and protect such a place is a spiritual act. To destroy it is desecration.

We are among the most fortunate people in the world. Few places are so lovely, so temperate, so well-watered, so civil, so wealthy, so educated, and so new. In the islands, the marine ecosystem plunges to depths of a thousand feet. At the crest of the Cascades, the peaks rise nearly two miles high. Between is a cornucopia of ecosystems, of rocky shore and sandy beach, of tulip field and dairy farm, of old growth and murmuring cottonwood, of alpine meadow and sullenly retreating glacier. We live on a very small percentage of this paradise. True wilderness is still just an hour from our doors.

That's the good news. More troubling is that we're going to have to share. The state's intermediate projection of population growth in our three counties in the next 19 years, to 2025 – which is the horizon this E3 conference is aimed at – is 126,000 more people. That means that in the next 19 years we have to build another Bellingham, another Lynden, another, Mount Vernon, another Anacortes, and another Friday Harbor. In 19 years!

The state of Washington will have reached 8 million people by 2025. If I live that long, it will mean more than a three-fold increase in population in my lifetime. The United States, which just passed 300 million (a doubling of population in just 50 years), will add another 80 million by 2025. Our planet, which had 6 billion people in 2000, will have 8 billion in 2025. In the eight hours between the time you arrived at this conference and the time you leave it, the world will have had a net population gain equal to the 73,000 people who live in Bellingham.

Another Bellingham, today!

We did not evolve with the ability to mentally grasp the need for a new Bellingham every eight hours. To contemplate climate change. To come to grips with oceans where, by 2025, the commercial seafood harvest is projected to be as little as one third what it was in 1950.

Accordingly, this conference faces at least two challenges. One is to think at a time scale none of us is used to thinking in: to 2025. Even that horizon is ridiculously modest: as a region we *should* be thinking to 2125, or even to the seven generations out that the Native American inhabitants use. How are we going to keep God's Country in the condition a Creator might want us to? How do we become good stewards of the most beautiful place on Earth?

The other challenge is what to teach our children about the crisis they face. Do we soft-pedal it, and just get them jazzed about the ferns and the flowers? Or do we scare them to death with the truth? No generation has ever faced the pace of change and uncertainty they will encounter. How do we walk that educational tightrope between inspiration, and despair?

The first task is to decide whether we are optimists about the future, or pessimists. I submit that we *must* be optimists, for survival demands no less. We have to believe things can get better, not worse, or they won't. Once we give up, our children are doomed.

Fortunately, there is ample evidence that things can get better. If we want to measure things materially, we in Northwest Washington are largely better off than humans have ever been in history. Average home size has roughly doubled since World War II, even as family size has fallen. Vehicles owned per household have doubled, and

miles driven have tripled. Airplane travel that used to be exotic is now routine, so much so that we grumble about all our neighbors in the airport line. We are better educated. We live longer. We are less disabled by disease. For goodness sake, we even have Viagra.

If we want to measure things culturally, much the same is true. There have never been as many books, magazines, newspapers, television channels, movies, artists, community playhouses, visiting speakers, and easy access to information as there is now. We may gripe about the quality of information, but in terms of quantity, we live in a Renaissance cubed.

Even environmentally, in many ways things are getting better, not worse. Total U.S. carbon monoxide emissions from vehicles are down about 60 percent; lead down 99 percent. And that's factoring in the increase of vehicles. Per individual car, carbon monoxide emissions are down 96 percent from the 1960s.

Acid rain is on the decline. A global ban has been instituted on ozone-destroying chemicals. Industrial toxic releases have fallen two-thirds just since 1988, according to the EPA. Accumulated levels of contaminants in body tissues are declining – our children should be carrying less toxins than we are.

Here in the Northwest, I grew up in an era when the burning of slash piles, wigwam burners, fireplaces, and smokestacks made the air far dirtier than today. Anacortes and Bellingham stank. Urban bays were brown. Clearcuts were huge, and unregulated. Streams were choked with silt. At one time the San Juan Islands were shaved mostly bare. Sewage was untreated. I played with my cousins in Port Orchard on a bay that reeked of human sewage, and thought nothing of it. Littering was chronic. The sheer waste of wood, fish, glass, metal, and paper was staggering. My father died at 57 after being exposed to a lifetime of toxic chemicals as a painting contractor. My uncle had his health destroyed by asbestos at the Bremerton shipyard.

We've come a long ways in a very short time. There was virtually no environmental regulation when I grew up, no EPA, no Ecology, no Shorelines Act, no Forest Practices Act, no Growth Management Act, no Endangered Species Act. There was no recycling. Certainly there was no environmental education. Even as late as 1990, when I went into teachers' classrooms at the height of the spotted owl wars, they were teaching solely about rainforest destruction in Brazil. It was the politically safe thing to

do, to focus on problems 5,000 miles away instead of 50 miles, but of course it taught students nothing about the trees they could actually see. The teachers had no teaching materials about their own backyard, and no knowledge, either.

This must change. The first thing we must teach is that the environment is *our* problem, not someone else's. We have to create fierce defenders of *this* unique place, not just other places. Clean up *here*, before we crusade over *there*.

And we have to hurry. We are in a race, between reform and catastrophe.

Traditional environmental education is an act of faith. Expose them, and they will turn green, the theory goes. A field trip here, a science unit there, and voila, the world is saved.

I wish it were that easy.

There is much truth to the mantra of get-them-outdoors. When I asked my environmental journalism students at Western what got them interested in the environment, for most it was early exposure – usually by parents – to the outdoors.

But public use of the outdoors, and interest in it, is declining. Generations X, Y and Z are not only less likely to hunt and fish, they are less likely to backpack or visit National Parks. If you read their magazines, the outdoors is a place of challenge, not of spiritual renewal. It is a physical test, not a reward for its own sake. Watch their movies: the woods are where the slashers live. Nowadays, most people take their indoors with them when they go outdoors. Tent use has declined while motorhomes and boats get ever-bigger. Kids like nature better when they have four walls and a shower to come back to. As a society, fewer and fewer of us have outdoor jobs. We spend more time alone, with electronic entertainment. The theme is escapism, not engagement. Attention spans are shrinking. The pace of life is accelerating.

No one is *against* the environment. There is nobody who cannot appreciate a pretty sunset, or a mountain view. Most Americans also understand and appreciate the role of resource industries. We believe in balance, and moderation. But we are an adaptable species, as happy in Manhattan as Glacier or Marblemount. As much as we wish it wasn't so, children grow up just fine in urban environments. We don't *need* the outdoors as wallpaper. So, increasingly, our children are hard-put to say what the outdoors is for. And to suggest the planet is not just for us, that other creatures have

rights too, is an idea that still strikes some people as radical. Oxygen is just there. Food comes in plastic wrap. Farms exist to provide scenery for weekend outings. Environment-schironment. Who needs caribou when we have cows?

The relatively easy problems are on the way to being solved: smokestack emissions, Superfund sites, routine recycling. But how do you engage students with population growth? Global warming? Land use planning? Species retention? Personal choices for green living?

First, let's admit that schools are built for the convenience of adults, not children. It's a place to park our kids where they can be watched, controlled and socialized until they're ready to leave the nest. It's not a place for easy social and political engagement with the real world; to get outsiders in, or insiders out. If you try to engage them as a teacher, you're as likely to be punished as rewarded. They've tossed half their curriculum aside for the WASL, and we want them to teach more environment?

Second, education is fairly static, despite the constant calls for reform. I just returned to teach at Western Washington University after an absence of 33 years, and little has changed except the addition of electronics to show slides and Powerpoint. Public schools are no different. Any adult feels at home returning to them. Same rooms, same bulletin boards, same curriculum, mostly. Textbooks were mediocre when I was a kid – earnest, but dull – and they are mostly earnest and dull now.

Third, as the world speeds up, maturation is slowing down. It takes the smart kids a long time to accumulate the knowledge to perform in our crazed economy. It used to be eight years of schooling was considered pretty good, then 12. Now it's 16 years in school, or 20, and you're expected to go back to school half a dozen times after that to get retrained. When we talk about education anymore, we're talking about a good chunk of a person's life in which they are cloistered. For many, it's a prison sentence of tedium.

It's not the schools' fault. It's the community's fault. Intellectual mediocrity offends no one, and so we drill fractional this and prepositional that while Asia is adding the urban equivalent of a Manhattan Island every six weeks.

Ideally, our kids should get out more, not just to the environment but the workplace and the meeting hall. There should be at least one school class at every council meeting in Northwest Washington; one tagging every campaign; one at every hearing;

one at every cleanup; one at every groundbreaking; and, one at every homeless shelter. We don't expose enough kids to the real political world, and then wonder why they have little interest in it.

I think the community has to engage the schools. I think we need to get real grownups talking about real problems and ask kids to think real thoughts about solving them. I think we need to be honest with them about what's going on – that our planet is changing faster than at any time since the last Ice Age.

Most adults, let alone their kids, have never talked to a real scientist. Most have never met a planner. Most have never heard a political speech in person. Most have never seen a zoning map, or a watershed map, or a GIS map, of where they live. Most have never used a spotting scope, never held a compass or a sextant, never read a tide table, never identified a planet or constellation, never been to a sewage treatment plant. Most cannot tell a cedar from a fir, a Chinook from a Coho, a northern flicker from a pileated woodpecker, or a Himalaya blackberry from the native kind. Most have never been to a recycling center or a landfill, or could tell you where their garbage goes. Ask yourself: where do they bury my garbage? I'm betting a majority in this audience doesn't know.

Most kids have never seen salmon spawn in a local slough. Most could not find anything to eat in the woods. Most have never slept under the stars. Most have never ridden in a hybrid car, wired their classroom to a photovoltaic panel, or shoveled out a composting toilet.

Environmental ideas are not complicated. A sixth grader should be able to grasp the idea behind zoning, behind green labeling, behind green taxes. Any kid who gets into a car warm from sunshine on a cold day understands the greenhouse effect. Tell the girls what accumulated toxins they probably carry in their breast milk, and the boys what accumulated toxins can do to sperm count. They'll wake up.

We do have to make it real. Somehow we've gotten the crazy idea in this country that conservatism is at war with conservation, that to be liberal is to be in love with regulation in triplicate, and that any environmental impact statement worth its salt has to be too long, and too boring, to ever be read.

Baloney!

Kids are the world's greatest baloney detectors. They know when they're being talked down to and patronized by oh-my-sweet nature walks that take care to say everything about nothing so as not to offend Sally nut-case in the PTA. The world is adding a Bellingham every eight hours, people. What are we telling our kids about that? Nothing.

Trust me, kids know how to navigate the mall: the Chamber of Commerce can stop panicking. Any American student has a consumer goods wish list eight hundred years long; we all do. But do they know how to shoehorn 126,000 people into Northwest Washington the next 19 years – that's 6,000 a year, 120 a week, 17 or 18 a day – without losing the beauty they grew up with? And that's not even the high projection. This population growth *could* represent wonderful opportunity: the chance to make denser, more walkable, and more shoppable Northwest Washington cities that represent the very latest of urban design. Or, it could be a sprawling disaster.

Do kids know how to cope with the probable loss of the glaciers in their lifetime, \$20 a pound salmon, and the floods and forest fires Northwest scientists say are coming with global warming? Do they know how their food choices affect agriculture, or that their polypropylene is made from oil, or that someone has invented a suitcase-sized box that you put cow manure in one end, and electricity comes out the other?

If we want to educate our kids about the environment we have to start by being honest, the good and the bad, our achievements and our failures. The scientific consensus right now is that this century is going to see major temperature and sea-level rise. My expectation is that will ultimately produce huge migrations of refugees comparable to the barbarian invasions that brought down the Roman Empire, as people seek to escape desertification, famine, and flood. If you don't believe me, check out the Hispanic migration to Northwest Washington in search of economic survival, or the Asians smuggled into Vancouver in shipping containers, or the Sudanese in South Seattle trying to escape genocidal wars. Can your kid speak Hindi? Indian kids can speak English. I know because when I call about an electronics problem, Hyderabad and Bangalore answers the phone. That's environmental education too. The world has gone flat.

How many of us could map our own neighborhood watershed, name our own geology, tell native species from invasives, or calculate what our lives require in terms of energy and waste?

Environmental education will truly begin when educators get serious, and get frank, about what our civilization is facing, and what it can achieve. We're not just an adaptable species, we're a smart one, and we can solve this sucker – but only if we get to work at engaging kids, not placating them.

That's your job, today, so please, get to it. There's another Bellingham to build by 4:30 p.m.

Thank you.