



## A Conversation with Bill McKibben

by S. Alison Chabonais

**B**ill McKibben is the author of a dozen books on the environment and culture, most recently, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*. He explains how vibrant local economies are getting it right and showing us the way to a saner, human-scale world. McKibben also is co-founder of *350.org*, the first global grassroots movement to deal with climate change.

**Q. In *Deep Economy*, you note that America's "more is better" mantra of economic progress is no longer making us wealthier, but instead, less happy, less healthy and more insecure. Why is this?**

Up to a certain point, accumulation does make you happier. Visit, say, rural China; there, people live in extreme poverty, often with six or seven people in a room. When you make some money, perhaps working at a factory, you can heat your hut in the winter. You can add another room for you, your wife and your kid. You get some relative privacy for the first time in your life, worth a great deal in terms of increased happiness.

But, past a certain point—which economists around the world have estimated at roughly \$10,000 a year in average income, or \$40,000 for a family of four in this country—that equation starts to fall apart. Americans, for example, have been using their money to build massive houses, where everyone has their own room and electronic screen. We barely see our families, much less our neighbors. The average American today has half as many close friends as the average American of 1950.

**Q. What else have we sacrificed by buying into advertisers' push to accumulate more stuff?**

Where to start? Health, maybe. The average American is badly overweight, largely because of the intake of relatively expensive processed commercial foods, which we often rely on because we spend so much time at our jobs, earning the money we need to support a consumer way of life.

Or, consider leisure. The average European works about seven fewer weeks a year than we do. Yes, they consequently have less disposable income, but far more time with family and friends. Not surprisingly, Europeans generally report being happier with their lives than we are, concludes prominent British economist Richard Layard, in *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*.

**Q. *Deep Economy* makes a convincing case that rebuilding community-oriented neighborhoods and sustainable local economies delivers a better quality of life; so, where do we start?**

Probably the simplest place is with localizing food supplies. Because that's a consumer decision we make three times a day, we can convert at our own pace. I once spent a year eating nothing but local foods. I met many of my neighbors for the first time—all the farmers who were growing my food.

Neighborliness is a common outcome; in one study cited by Christopher Cook in *Diet for a Dead Planet*, sociologists followed shoppers, first around the supermarket, and then around the farmers' market; the average shopper engaged in ten times more

conversations at the farmers' market. They weren't just acquiring their weekly calories, they were rebuilding broken communities.

**Q. Realistically, which other vital areas of community life can we make sustainable soon?**

We can do much more for ourselves. In communications: A few giant conglomerates own most radio stations in this country; now, a low-power FM movement is erecting community stations across America. In education: We know that the best education comes in small classrooms and small schools; it's time to start deconsolidating. In government: In Vermont, where I live, we rely on town meetings; everyone in town gets together once a year and hashes out the budget, and it works.

Individuals' long-term survival depends on having a strong working community. By patronizing local businesses, they remain a hardy support network in tough times.

**Q. In speaking of the environmental fallout due to escalating consumption, you observe that, "If the rich countries can't change course, then the poor countries won't." What will it take to make the transition to a different lifestyle tolerable?**

Global warming makes it clear that we're all in this together. The only way we'll get out of this fix is if we work cooperatively.

That's why we're accelerating a huge global organizing drive for *350.org*. 350 is the amount of carbon dioxide, in parts per million, that climatologists now deem the safe maximum for our atmosphere. At 387, we're already past that total, turning the global climate issue from a problem into an emergency. We need *Natural Awakenings* readers to join us October 24, 2009, in organizing and attending rallies and events around the planet to draw attention to that number and its meaning. Together, we can reach out beyond individualism, toward survival of the community of humankind.

For more information visit [BillMcKibben.com](http://BillMcKibben.com).