



INTERVIEW

## Hot Air in the Blogosphere, As Climate Debate Heats Up

*Although he writes one of the most popular blogs on the environment, Dot Earth author Andrew Revkin recognizes both the drawbacks and potential of the Web for exploring complex issues. In an interview with Yale Environment 360, Revkin explains why the rhetoric surrounding climate change has gotten so hot.*

During the past year, as the discussion of climate-change issues has become more heated, journalist Andrew Revkin has often been in the midst of controversy. In one incident in October, conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh called Revkin an “environmental wacko” and suggested on the air that he commit suicide.

A reporter for the *New York Times* since 1995 and author of the popular Dot Earth blog, Revkin has had an unusually high public profile for a journalist who covers environmental issues. So it attracted media attention last month when Revkin announced he would be leaving the *Times* staff, but would continue writing Dot Earth.



Andrew  
Revkin

In an interview with *Yale Environment 360* editor Roger Cohn, Revkin said he will now spend more time focusing on environmental education, starting with a course he will be teaching at Pace University that will address a question he regularly asks on DotEarth: “Nine Billion People + One Planet = ?” (Or, as he says of a projected global population of 9 billion by 2050, “How do you make that happen without total screw-ups?”) In the wide-ranging interview, Revkin also talked about why the U.S. public has remained relatively unconcerned about climate change, what bothers him about writing a blog, and what he sees as the prospects for a world with 9 billion people.

“I could see us getting into a world where we’re just sort of living these hermetic lives,” he says, “...where we have no connection to the natural world anymore.”

**Yale Environment 360:** What made you make the decision recently to leave the staff position at the *New York Times*?

**Andy Revkin:** Well, I’ve been at the *Times* almost 15 years... It’s been an amazing portal through which to explore some of the biggest issues facing humanity right now. But I got to a point where the hamster-wheel quality of being a news reporter, where you are on this little cage thing and it’s spinning faster and faster, and trying to mesh the print work with the blog work [Dot Earth], which I started two-and-a-half years ago, was really challenging...

**e360:** In the last year in particular, you endured a lot of criticism from both sides of the climate change spectrum — from the skeptics and deniers, but also from some of the more mainstream climate scientists. Rush Limbaugh, on air, even called for you to commit suicide. I’m glad you didn’t take him up on that.

**Revkin:** He floated a thought experiment... Yes, I’ve been enduring a number of barbs, some justified.

**e360:** Did any of that criticism or controversy affect your decision to leave the *Times*?

**Revkin:** Well, you know, it does wear you down. Although, here I am continuing to blog, which is the worst of what you experience online. So I guess I must either have a thick skin or be really stupid... The blog is a daily sort of exploration of issues that involves a lot of passions and has a lot of echo chamber aspects. I still feel the online effort is worth more than the downside. The potential upside is real.

**e360:** The downside, as you see it, is the superficiality of some of the back-and-forth in the commenting and the level of the rhetoric?

**Revkin:** On NPR the other day, some DJ played the old Monty Python routine: “I’d like to have an argument.” And it reminded me so much of the blogosphere. Because he goes into this room and this guy just starts spewing at him, and he says, “That’s not an argument,

that's mere contradiction." And then of course he realizes he's paying for the service of arguing. But there is a difference between contradiction and argument. Argument is sort of framing a set of statements around a position. Often what is in the blogosphere is just people lobbing things at each other, just contradicting each other. Even if they have links or background, it's not that there's a learning curve. That part is discouraging.

Listen to the full interview  
(43 min.)

**e360:** There's been so much heat surrounding the whole issue of climate change, and some real nastiness surrounding the discussion, particularly in the last year. Why do you think that's true, and do you see any possibility that that's going to change at any point?

**Revkin:** Well, I think it will probably get worse before anything really happens. There are a couple of trends. One is that push is coming to shove — twenty years ago the treaty that was signed in Rio by so many leaders was purely aspirational — it didn't have teeth... There was lot of lobbying, a lot of intensity. But the stakes were not concretely laid out. Now you are talking about bills going through at least one side of the Congress, we're close to having a bill passed that might get to a president's desk. The EPA has determined that the stuff [greenhouse gas] is dangerous and needs to be regulated. So the stakes are higher, and people are getting more intense, people meaning the lobbying community.

And there is money on the other side. But the idea that, somehow, Al Gore and his minions are the powerbrokers here, compared to the fossil fuel interests, kind of amuses me. Because you look at the total amount of money in the renewable energy universe versus the amount of money in the carbon fuel universe, it is not even close.

**e360:** What role does the Web play in all this?

**Revkin:** The Web is an amplifier and an echo chamber that takes assertions and distills them down in to bullion-cube intensity and lobs them around at light speed... Actually, Rush Limbaugh's diatribe on my comments on population and climate and carbon were not the result of him hearing me. They were the result of one of his staff reading a blog post that was a distorted distillation of what I said through a Web video interaction at a meeting. I don't think he would have lobbed that bomb if there hadn't been the blogosphere out there to condense down into a caricature something that someone says. And then that moves around at light speed and leads to this kind of amplification.

**e360:** So they're commenting not on what you said but on...

**Revkin:** On how it was interpreted. And no one ever goes back to the source.

**e360:** There are the skeptics, the deniers out there, whose view is that the Earth is either not warming at all, or that human activity is not in any way responsible for it. This point of view has been pretty widely discredited by virtually all scientific organizations. But it's still out there. How do you think journalists should be handling that? Should they be giving due to the skeptics' point of view? Should they be ignoring it? It's a difficult debate or discussion to cover, I think, as a journalist. How do you find it?

**Revkin:** Well, over the years I've written quite a bit about this question about how to cover these issues. And I think if it's a story about a

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development in the science, such as what's going on with Greenland's glaciers, I talk to people who are studying Greenland's glaciers, first of all. I don't call the Cato Institute. But I also don't call the World Wildlife Fund. If it's a science

question, I talk to scientists. And there are some scientists working in the field with different personal views of the level of danger that global warming poses, even among those who don't disagree it's an actual phenomenon.

I try to make sure that people understand that there are several different sets of questions here. One is, can humans warm the climate? That's the most basic question, and the answer is a resounding "yes." Pat Michael, a libertarian, a Cato Institute guy, who is also University of Virginia emeritus, he absolutely agrees on that. The next level of question is, are we doing that? Is it already discernible? That's a slightly more difficult question. And that involves a combination of modeling, observations, comparison with past climate behavior.... There are plenty of scientists who are publishing work in this field, who are serious, who are not some bought-and-sold advocates [who] don't hold the view that you can make a confident case that more than half of the recent warming is our doing...

**e360:** You have been covering this issue for at least two decades, that I'm aware, at least as far back as the Rio summit [in 1992], right?

**Revkin:** Well, my first long cover story on global warming was in 1988...

**e360:** Has public understanding of this issue evolved, changed, increased much over that time?

**Revkin:** The polling I've seen says, we are still basically in three buckets. The biggest bucket is the middle — the people who are disengaged, confused, totally uninterested in anything except Britney Spears or the stock market... And then there's about 20 percent who absolutely reject the idea that humans are or could dangerously destabilize the climate. And then there are about — and again these are very rough numbers — 15 to 20 percent who are totally bought-in, who call their Congress people and say we need a climate bill, you know, who turn out the lights when they leave rooms and all that stuff. And that hasn't really changed at all.

In fact, there's pretty good evidence that when you have some event, or when the Al Gore movie came out, it essentially appeared to intensify the positions of people who are already in either the 20 percent who are bought in or the 20 percent who reject this concept utterly. It hardened positions, rather than changed positions.

**e360:** Do you think the fact that most people are really still not paying attention or are that concerned about this issue, do you think that's a function of the media and scientists not communicating it well, or is it a function of people not really reacting to a problem or situation that seems very far off into the future?

**Revkin:** It's pretty primal. Which explains why there are some advocates for action on climate who keep trying to link the here-and-now events: Australian wild fires, or the tree die-off [in North America]. If they can make the point that these changes that you're seeing viscerally in your landscape now are the result of this thing, maybe that will be more likely to change people. But there, too, the causal linkage between a regional change and human-driven warming of the climate through the buildup of greenhouse gases is one of the hardest things to do confidently.

I've done a number of pieces starting in 2006 that really say that no matter what you think of global warming, the world does not have the energy menu it will need to have a smooth ride to 2050. Not even remotely. Two billion of us are cooking on firewood and dung right now, and would very happily move to charcoal, coal, anything, so that they're not dying prematurely from indoor smoke in their houses and their huts in Africa or South Asia. And then you have us super-emitters here in America, from 300 million to 400 million of us in the next 30 to 40 years. And somehow or other the idea of 9 billion people living that energy-intense a life doesn't seem tenable.

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So the fossil-fuel norm doesn't look like it's doable. And the norm of having no energy options is completely untenable. No matter what you think of the climate problem, we have an energy problem.

**e360:** You mentioned earlier that one of the reasons you decided to leave the *Times* staff was a sense that you could contribute more on these issues in other ways, one of them being teaching. How so, and what are your plans for teaching now?

**Revkin:** The main thing I will be doing at Pace University is building a course that essentially mirrors what I've been doing at the blog. It's a course that poses a question: How do we head toward more or less nine billion people with the fewest regrets? My working title for my course is "Nine Billion + 1 =?" Nine billion people plus one planet — how do you make that happen without total screwups?...

What I really want to create is a hub, a portal, so that a school in New Delhi can interact with a school in New York, so the students are co-learning about some of these issues as well.

**e360:** Have you laid the groundwork for any of that?

**Revkin:** Well, I was at Linfield College in Oregon, a professor there came from Wheaton College recently, and mentioned that a professor of U.S.-Russian relations at Wheaton several years back did an innovation. This teacher started co-teaching U.S.-Russian relations with a professor of the same subject in St. Petersburg, Russia. And they were doing it with a video hookup. You know, Skype is

free. So, suddenly you have American and Russian students co-learning U.S.-Russian relations. And I can't see the downside there.

**e360:** You posed the question on your column, you posed it today: Nine billion people plus one planet equal what? What's your answer to that? How can humanity — facing population, warming, environmental degradation — how can it flourish in the next few centuries or even in the next century and avoid severely degrading many of the planet's life-sustaining systems.

**Revkin:** In canvassing a lot of people's thinking about this problem, there's obviously a wide range of views. Some are say we're going to hit a wall, we just haven't hit at yet...

**e360:** The planetary boundary argument?

**Revkin:** Yes. And then there's the innovator crowd, the crowd who's always said, "Look back in history. Every time we thought we've hit a resource limit we've found either an end-run or an innovation that makes it go away." A resource is only something you define as a need, and those change all the time. Coal, four hundred years ago, was a black rock, meaningless. Now it's the fundamental underpinning of our energy systems. Maybe in twenty years it won't be anymore. That's the idea.

Both arguments have merits. I think we can have a totally functional planet with nine billion people. We can feed them, provide water, have energy — the world is bathed in untold terawatts of solar power. But the thing that we could easily lose is the diversity of life on the

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planet. Having large ecosystems that have great migrations — there have been some books recently about the end of great animal migrations. Africa is still basically an unpopulated continent, despite the fact that it's going to see a doubled

human population in the next 50 years. But you will see some of those great things go away. The great apes, the great fishes, the tunas, the sharks, are clearly in deep trouble. And it'll probably happen in a way that successive generations won't even notice. This is a concept of shifting baselines that many people have different terms for.

**e360:** Meaning, people don't even remember what was there 30 or 50 years earlier?

**Revkin:** Yes... There are already some academics saying that the Arctic, for a young person growing up now, is a place in flux. When you and I were kids, the Arctic was this frozen wasteland. But for this generation, it will be unremarkable that there is growing transit through the Arctic Ocean, that it's basically a functional ocean, that polar bears are a rarer, more-endangered species and that we're thinking about it more in that way than as just an Arctic predator... It becomes a given.

When I was in college, I worked on lobster boats in Rhode Island, doing marine fisheries work in summers. And one of the old codgers who worked at the fisheries center with me, he used to joke and say, "We use lobsters as cod bait." We don't use lobsters as cod bait now, you know — he was the last of the breed who knew of that level of abundance. And I have written a lot about Jeremy Jackson, Carl Safina, and all the marine biologists who bemoan the great losses of fishes. You can still go buy tuna in the market, but the tunas that we know now are just a shadow of what was in the oceans before.

So there's a wistful sense, just to think about how much richness could be sustained if we care more about it. And this is where these issues of how dangerous climate change is or how important the Amazon is, they're as much questions of values as they are questions of data.

And I wrote a piece, sort of a provocative piece about suppose we get the perfect energy source, suppose Dan Nocera at MIT or Nate Lewis at Caltech, they do it. Bang. You know, and suddenly we have abundant free solar power, so we can get off coal in a hurry... Someone just hits the home run. Does that solve the world's environmental problems? Hardly. Because suddenly we can do whatever we want. Energy is the great enabler. We can turn seawater into drinking water. That shows we can do that in limitless amounts, if we have limitless free energy. We can grow synthetic crops and all kinds of stuff. And we could also pave over the world.

So without evolving our sense of values, even as we push on technological innovation, we could be in — I wouldn't even say big trouble — we could just lose things that I think don't have to be lost. And even in that there's an interesting debate. Should I care?

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I recently went up to Toronto to do some reporting. You know, I went to Newark airport in a car. I walked 50 yards in the terminal. I flew to Toronto's downtown airport. I got out of the plane, went across the little tube into a ferry, and I'm in downtown Toronto... Toronto has one of the largest underground complexes, one of the largest in the world. It's 23 kilometers of underground living. I spent almost the entire day in Toronto indoors. And mostly underground.

And, you know, I could see us getting into a world where we're just sort of living these hermetic lives — where we have limitless energy, and we have no connection to the natural world anymore.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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