

CLIMATE CRUSADER

He's been described as the "most effective environmental activist of our age". Meet indomitable US writer and 350.org founder, Bill McKibben.

WORDS BY **KATE ARNEMAN**

IF ANYONE HAS GOOD REASON TO BE BITTER OR AT LEAST CYNICAL, BILL MCKIBBEN DOES. IN 1989, FRESH FROM A STINT ON STAFF AT THE NEW YORKER AND AN ENVIRONMENTAL AWAKENING, HE WROTE *THE END OF NATURE*, THE FIRST BOOK FOR A GENERAL AUDIENCE ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE.

Over the following two decades, he devoted himself to writing for a range of high-profile publications, fervently attempting to communicate the sobering consequences of scientific findings and the necessity of acting to avert environmental and social upheaval. But, as McKibben puts it in his most recent book *Eaarth*: "The scientists didn't merely underestimate how fast the Arctic would melt, they overestimated how fast our hearts would melt."

Concluding that writing alone would not bring about the necessary political change to cut carbon emissions, McKibben and six students at Middlebury College in Vermont (where McKibben is a scholar in residence) started a grassroots movement, 350.org, to mobilise public support for strong government action at the 2009 Copenhagen Conference. The campaign went viral, with 5,200 actions in 181 countries on October 24, 2009. CNN called it "the most

widespread day of political action in the planet's history."

"There were so many great pictures that it was covered extensively. We owned Google News for about 36 hours," McKibben recalls.

The choice of an obscure scientific figure – 350 – as the focus of the campaign was a deliberate and effective strategy. The number refers to an atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide in parts per million (ppm), and is considered by many scientists to be a threshold beyond which we will experience dangerous climate change. We are already at 392 ppm and rising by 2 ppm each year.

"Everybody who ran a picture of [350] had to write a caption or a story explaining what it meant, otherwise it was inexplicable," says McKibben. "It was an attempt to do real science education."

And yet the Copenhagen Conference was certainly a "fiasco of the first order", he concedes.

It would be entirely understandable if, at this point, the 50-year old had retreated to his idyllic-sounding life in rural Vermont to nurse his disappointment, or written a cathartically scathing polemic about the short-sightedness and greed of human beings. Yet here he is five months after Copenhagen – jetlagged but entirely focussed and wearily hopeful – at the Sydney Writers' Festival, promoting

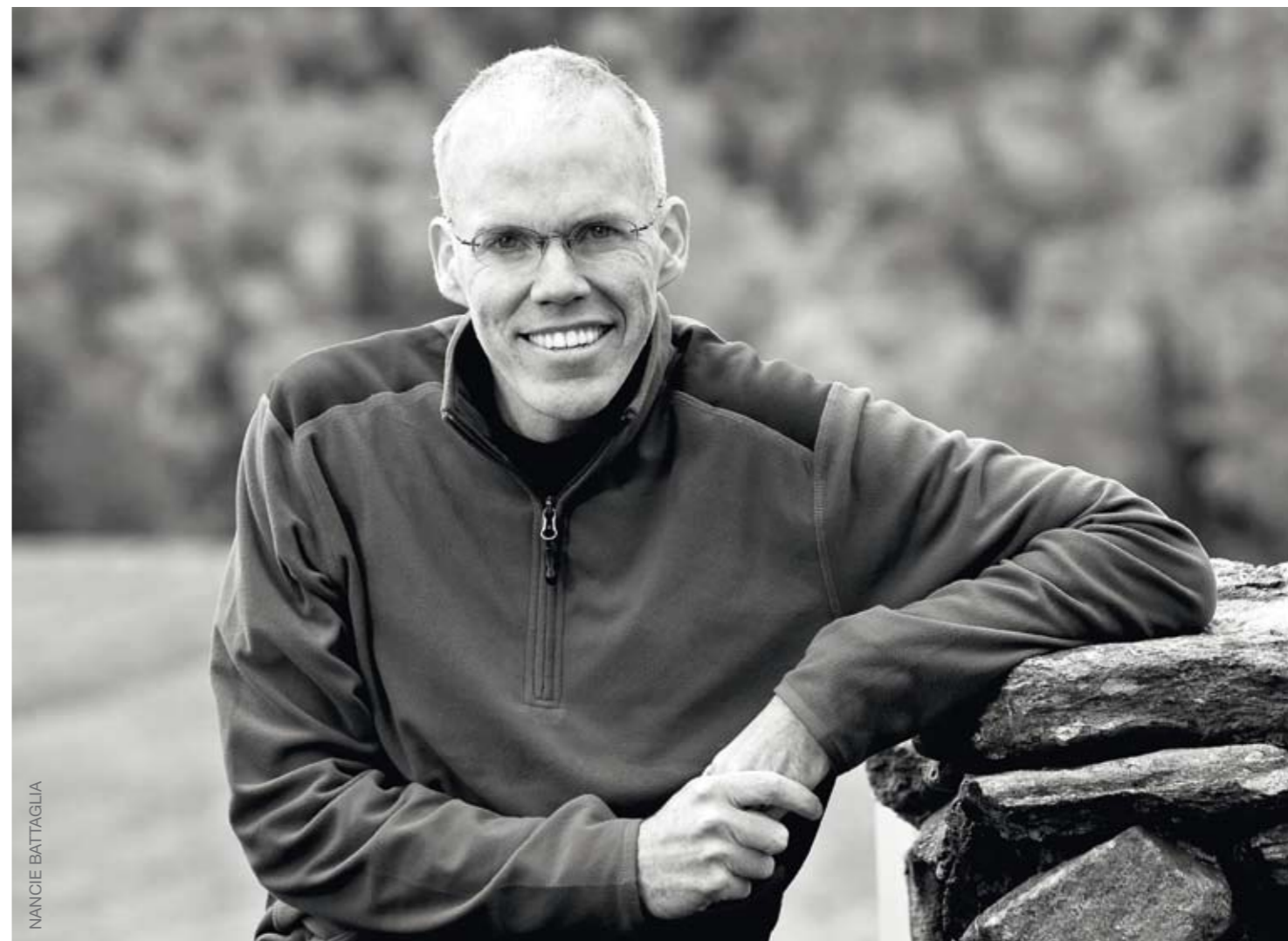
Eaarth, the book he has written for a post-Copenhagen world, and spruiking the next 350.org campaign – a worldwide working bee (or, in American parlance, a 'global work party').

Perhaps this dogged perseverance can be attributed to the ethical underpinnings of McKibben's activism.

"That basic command of the gospels to love one's neighbour probably sunk in fairly deeply at an early age," says McKibben. "So the fact that we're now busily drowning our neighbours and giving them various mosquito-borne diseases is hard for me to deal with."

"There's questions both of North-South equity, and really for the first time, of powerful intergenerational equity – of degrading the planet for everybody who's going to come after you."

Eaarth marks a turning point in McKibben's writing: the message is no longer that we have to act now to avert the consequences of dangerous climate change, it's that we have to act now to adapt to the consequences of dangerous climate change, which we are already experiencing. 'Eaarth' is McKibben's name for the transformed planet we have created. In many ways it's a frightening, unfamiliar and unpredictable place but, says McKibben, there are steps we can and should be taking to ease our transition into an uncertain future.



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McKibben notes that making our communities more resilient is critical. "Community is the scale at which to do it, not your own individual life." One aspect is localising food and energy supplies. Less tangible, but no less important, is re-establishing community ties, trust and goodwill.

“The fossil fuel industry is the most powerful force in the world, so we need to build a stronger one.”

However, McKibben is not advocating an inward-looking, parochial lifestyle. "At the same time, you need to be globally engaged to keep things from getting to the point where there's no adapting to [climate change]," he says.

He sees 350.org as a vehicle for people across the globe to be politically engaged on climate issues. The Global Work Party, held on 10/10/10, demonstrated how local, community-based action and global political engagement complement each other.

"There are a lot of people who are interested and worried about this but aren't by nature political – [they] like doing things with their hands, like doing practical things," says McKibben.

With the slogan "Let's get to work!" the campaign was a chance for people to get up on a roof and install a solar panel

or a wind turbine, set up a community permaculture garden or take part in a bike ride. And around the world, thousands did, with more than 7,300 actions in 188 countries, 172 of those in Australia.

Many of those involved may have never marched in a rally or written a letter to a politician, but, says McKibben, they "were participating in a powerful political act, too, since the point is to say to our leaders: 'You get to work!'"

Today, McKibben is tired. He flew in from China yesterday, has completed

one speaking engagement and book signing already and will, after interviews all afternoon, take part in a panel discussion at Sydney Town Hall along with Clive Hamilton and economist Ross Garnaut, moderated by Tim Flannery. It's demanding work; what is it that keeps him going?

"That there are people all over the world who, it turns out, really want to do something. The problem is not that there aren't people who want to fight this, there are. But the problem is that the opposition is really powerful. The fossil fuel industry is the most powerful force in the world right now, so we need to build a stronger one. And I don't know whether we can. But we're making progress, enough progress to make it worth keeping the fight on." 🌱

Visit our website www.gmagazine.com.au to view photos of the Global Work Party from all over the world. For further info on the organization, visit 350.org