

# Climate and the Politics of Hope

**A conversation with journalist Mark Hertsgaard, author of *Hot: Living Through the Next Fifty Years on Earth***

Mark Hertsgaard, an accomplished global-environmental reporter, wants you to remember the first [Earth Day](#), how it really started, 42 years ago, on April 22, 1970. He wants to remind you of the far-reaching change it brought about — under a conservative Republican president, no less.

In an [editorial in this week's issue of \*The Nation\*](#), Hertsgaard notes that here in the U.S., as Earth Day has become “a bland, tired ritual that polluters and politicians have learned to ignore or co-opt,” there are environmentalists who are ready to get rid of it altogether. But rather than do that, he writes:



*why not recall the real history of Earth Day and revive its original—and much more demanding—vision?*

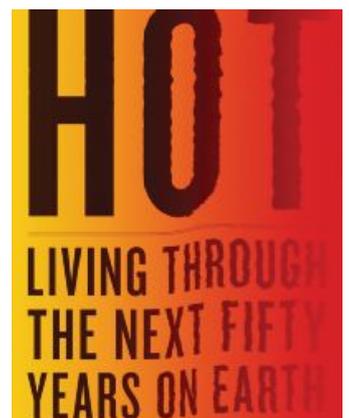
*Organized in 1970 by Senator Gaylord Nelson and activist Denis Hayes, the first Earth Day so frightened president Richard Nixon that he decided he had to become an environmental president if he wanted to win a second term. And unlike later presidents who invoked that title, Nixon lived up to it. He created the Environmental Protection Agency, which today's Republicans love to demagogue. His aides pioneered such transformative measures as environmental impact reports and regular pollution monitoring. And he signed landmark environmental laws—the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act and more—that on paper are still among the strongest in the world (indeed, that have been the model for the rest of the world's environmental laws). ...*

*In short, America's first and biggest environmental victories were won after mass grassroots activism persuaded an otherwise indifferent president that he had to deliver or risk losing his job. Alas, this history seems to have been forgotten by many of today's green activists, to say nothing of ordinary citizens.*

Hertsgaard, the environment correspondent for *The Nation*, has written for two decades about climate change and the human side of our global environmental crises, for magazines like *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Time*, *Vanity Fair*, and others, and he's the author of two important books on the subject: 1998's [Earth Odyssey: Around the World In Search of Our Environmental Future](#) and last year's [Hot: Living Through the Next Fifty Years on Earth](#), which is just out in paperback this month.

The latter, which I [reviewed](#) for *The New York Times Book Review*, presents the clearest and strongest case I've seen for what Hertsgaard calls the “double imperative” of the climate fight: namely, because climate change is already upon us, we have to *adapt* and *live through it* even as we work as hard and as fast as we can to slow it down and, ultimately, stop it. With its eye-opening, on-the-ground reporting on adaptation efforts around the world (from U.S. cities to the Netherlands, Bangladesh, China, and the Sahel), *Hot* is one of the handful of recent books — along with James Hansen's [Storms of My Grandchildren](#), Bill McKibben's [Eaarth](#), and Amy Seidl's [Finding Higher Ground](#) — that I tell people they must read if they want to understand the reality of our climate situation, and what we still can do.

I reached out to Hertsgaard as I was preparing to launch this blog, back in



February, and asked if he'd be willing to talk with me about the reporting he's done since *Hot* was published, on both climate adaptation (especially in agriculture, in [Africa's Sahel](#) and [beyond](#)) and on grassroots climate politics in the U.S., including [the success story](#) (as he wrote this month for *Mother Jones*) of the [Beyond Coal](#) campaign.



Hertsgaard and I spoke by phone on April 13, and our conversation caps a series of interviews and exchanges on climate, culture, and politics that I've posted here on [The Roost](#) since early March — with [David Roberts](#) of *Grist* on climate and the Very Serious media, [Bill McKibben](#) on the climate justice movement, [Paul Kingsnorth](#) on what hope looks like in the face of collapse, and [Amy Seidl](#) on building resilience right where we live. There will be more — fear not! — but this rounds out the first installment of these conversations. I hope they're food for thought — and more than thought. Action.

“Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary.” -Thoreau, [“Civil Disobedience”](#)

-Wen Stephenson

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**WS:** When I [reviewed](#) *Hot*, last year, I started out by saying I hadn't had “the talk” yet with my kids (who are now 12 and 8) about global warming. But then, I said, we grown-ups haven't had the talk yet among ourselves, really. We don't seem to know how. It's too scary. Or maybe it's not scary enough, for a lot of people, because they don't know enough about it. And I went on to praise the book for trying to jump-start that conversation. So are we, as grown-ups, having that talk yet among ourselves?

**MARK HERTSGAARD:** It's hard to generalize. Some people are. But we're certainly not having it through the mainstream media. Now, are we doing it more among ourselves, in the private sphere, at our churches, at our schools, among our friends, on poker nights, or picnics? I don't think so, not yet. I don't hear it.

But I'm working with some close colleagues to try and change that. We're going to try and organize parents — “Climate Parents” — to give a voice to parents about this. I think there are a lot of people who know, perfectly well, that the climate is scary, and parents in particular. They're scared, but they don't know what to do. And so, as a result, they practice what I call soft denial. It's a different kind of denial than the nonsensical, economically or ideologically based denial that we're so familiar with. Soft denial is when people know perfectly well what's going on — and are scared about what it means, both for them and especially for their children or grandchildren — and yet they continue to carry on with their lives as if it's not this five-alarm fire that is about to burn down their kids' house. And that is what we hope to change with this group, Climate Parents. Parents are probably the single most under-organized constituency on climate change. And if we can change that, if we can let them get in touch, not only with the danger, but the opportunities — and I would even go so far as to say the obligations, as a parent — to speak out and take action on this, we think big things could follow.

**WS:** Has it launched yet? Will there be a big rollout?

**HERTSGAARD:** Probably sometime between Mother's Day and Father's Day we're going to roll it out, hoping to do a national day of action. The news hook is the new national science education standards for K-12 that are being promoted this year by the National Research Council, which is part of the National Academy of Sciences, and the pushback from the Heartland Institute types, who want their nonscientific curricula put forward. And we are going to try to get parents to support the national science standards, as a first step to get them moving on this issue. And then, frankly, we hope to move them to do more.

**WS:** When you look at the climate science and the rate of global greenhouse emissions, it seems impossible now to prevent anything less than a 2-degree Celsius (3.6-degree Fahrenheit) global temperature rise, above pre-industrial levels, this century. And if you realize what that means, in terms of the impact on the planet and humanity — at least one meter of sea-level rise, possibly much more, vastly increasing drought, flood, extreme weather, ocean acidification, mass extinction — then what does it mean, at this point, to take climate seriously? And not just for the media. You wrote a strong piece for *The Nation* in December, after the most recent UN climate negotiations in South Africa, titled [“Durban: Where the Climate Deniers-in-Chief Ran the Show.”](#) If they're not taking climate science seriously enough at the

UN climate talks, what hope do we have?

**HERTSGAARD:** Well, in *Hot*, when I look at the climate impacts that are “locked in,” these are 2-degree-C impacts. And that’s the terrible dilemma of the climate problem — as compared to the other great problem of our era, nuclear weapons. With nuclear weapons, all they had to do was step back from the abyss, and not push the button. That is existentially very different from climate, where there is this lag effect, and where we’re already locked-in to a significant amount of climate change, unless we figure out a way to extract the carbon dioxide that’s already out there in the atmosphere.

There are ways to still slow this down. I’m not a big fan of most of the geoengineering stuff, but on the food side of the climate dilemma — and I’m writing and reporting a lot on that right now — we have an enormous opportunity to extract carbon, and store it in plants, and especially the soil. That is one of the few, few tricks we still have up our sleeves, with things like bio char and ecological agriculture.

And the irony is, there’s all this talk about carbon capture and sequestration in the coal and energy field, billions of dollars being promised or even invested in it, and we don’t know whether it will work. Compare that to the fact that in agriculture, we know perfectly well that it will work: it’s called *photosynthesis*. And we know it works, but we have to figure out ways to bring it to scale.

Now, is that enough? No. Look at today. We’re barely at 1 degree C, and of course there’s more locked in, and look at what’s happening. So, no, it’s not enough.

You know, I don’t see how you save the Maldives. I don’t see how you save a lot of places around the world, unless you do enormous amounts of adaptation. Because we know, even under my optimistic scenario, that with the lag effects on sea level — and those are very, very long time scales — there’s no way, that I’ve heard of, that we can avoid at least three feet of sea-level rise. But how soon that comes is going to be very, very important. If that doesn’t come for a hundred years, that’s something we can prepare for. If it comes in fifty years, which is a kind of, not worst-case but very plausible scenario, that’s a lot harder.

So, as I wrote in *Hot*, we’re not going to be able to save everything. It’s too late for that. We missed that boat.

**WS:** So, is someone like [Paul Kingsnorth](#) — who says it’s time to face the fact that the situation is hopeless — essentially right?

**HERTSGAARD:** The angst of a guy like Kingsnorth, it’s very understandable — I’ve faced those kinds of questions, personally, and worked through them, not just in writing *Hot*, but writing *Earth Odyssey*, before that — but I didn’t think that he had a very good grasp of politics, or history, beyond the ecological sphere.

I mean, I look at someone like [Vaclav Havel](#) — who was the one who really taught me this lesson, when I interviewed him for *Earth Odyssey* — and “the politics of hope.” Hope is not some silly, light-hearted feeling that you maintain just to keep going. Hope is an active verb. It is a political choice. It led Havel to go to jail, under a system that had no appearance of falling. He went into jail in 1979 and served four years in solitary confinement, against the advice of his pal and fellow litterateur Milan Kundera, who said: Don’t do this, we need you on the outside. And Havel’s answer to that was: You know what, we never quite know what taking a certain political action will lead to, and when we try to think too far in advance, we end up not taking actions. And the important thing is to take actions, and to believe in the politics of hope. Even in the face of apparent impossibility.

And as Havel himself pointed out, in our interview, [Nelson Mandela](#) makes this point in spades. He went to jail in 1962 — 1962! — when there was no appearance that apartheid would ever fall. But he did it, because he believed in doing the right thing, and letting the chips fall where they may. Again, not in a self-sacrificing or foolish way. He really believed that this was what eventually was going to lead to victory. He could have been wrong. Havel could have been wrong. They both recognized that — and they did it *anyway*. That’s the point.

And Mr. Kingsnorth, I understand why he looks at the situation in despair. Anybody who looked at apartheid in 1962 would have despaired that it would ever change. But that’s not an excuse to give up. Especially — for me, personally — as a parent, I don’t care if the odds are 10,000 to 1. If it’s that one that could give my daughter — and of course others, but especially the single most important person in the world to me — I mean, I would throw myself in front of a train for her, why wouldn’t I devote my life to doing whatever is

necessary to give her that chance? So, if we're going to have a real, honest conversation about this, guess what? It's scary. It looks dark. But so did apartheid in 1962. So did opposing totalitarianism of the Soviet Union in 1979. And guess what, it changed.

It is quite arrogant to think that we know how history will work out — especially given that it is we who *make* history.

**WS:** One of the points you make in *Hot* is that our ability to tackle climate change depends as much on “social context” as on wealth and technology. Politics and culture can trump everything. For example, you look at Louisiana after Katrina. And I wrote that it made me wonder if there's not more hope for the African Sahel, [where you've reported on some remarkable success stories](#) of farmers reclaiming land from desertification, than there is for the American South, where the political culture still hasn't accepted the reality of climate change.

**HERTSGAARD:** Entirely possible.

**WS:** Right. But in terms of the politics of hope, you've been reporting recently about grassroots political movements around climate — the [Keystone pipeline effort](#), and the Beyond Coal campaign, which you [wrote about for Mother Jones](#). And it does seem there's a new kind of climate politics that transcends the old environmental politics. There's this broad coalition of allies, in these success stories you point to — and yet we still see it framed so often in the media as “environmentalists” versus business and jobs. As if environmentalists are the only ones who care, or have anything at stake in climate change. Do you see, in your reporting on this, a kind of political coalition-building that can get us beyond that old framing?

**HERTSGAARD:** Sure, that's how these very impressive recent victories were won, and it's something that some of us have been saying for a long time — that what environmentalists needed to do, if they were going to win, was to stop being a special-interest group and to start connecting with other people, and realize that their struggle is other peoples' struggle. I've said that environmentalists needed a jobs program, or I would go even further and say an antipoverty program. Because that's the main thing I've learned from traveling around the world — most people want to save the environment. They understand, at an intuitive human level, that we can't survive without the world around us. But because of the way that the world economy is structured, and other reasons, they're faced with the more immediate task of putting food on the table that night for their kids.

So if environmentalists wanted to make progress, they needed to have a jobs and antipoverty message, that could attract more supporters, because the people who are opposed to progress are the big corporations who make their money from the way things are. As [Bill McKibben](#) always rightly points out, the oil industry is the single richest business enterprise in human history, and you're not going to overcome that kind of political power with just one interest group, environmentalists, who think that because they have the right arguments they're going to change policy in Washington, DC. That's a basic lesson that environmentalists need to learn, and are beginning to learn — you see this with the environmental justice movement, and you see it most hearteningly with these recent victories of the Beyond Coal campaign.

**WS:** Tell us about those.

**HERTSGAARD:** It's very interesting. At the [end of that \[Mother Jones\] piece](#), the big question is what happens to the local workers and local communities [when you block or shut down a coal plant]. Well, in Washington State, the enviros and labor worked it out. Labor did not want that coal plant to close. And environmentalists said, Well, sorry, we're going to keep pushing for that. And they eventually succeeded. But when they did, the environmentalists took labor's side and even argued labor's side, in terms of how you change things going forward with that plant. They said, we wanted to close those plants on a five-year time frame, and we accepted ten years, not because of the company but because of the [labor union]. There was real — to use an old-fashioned word — solidarity.

And that solidarity is what's going to enable this kind of progress going forward in the future. And it comes, again, from real organizing. It must be going on ten years ago now, Carl Pope made a strategic decision that he was going to reach out to labor unions and say, we've got to figure out a way to work together. That led to the [BlueGreen Alliance](#), and years and years of back and forth discussions between them led to the kind of choices that were made there in Washington State. And I find that a very encouraging development.

**WS:** I just saw, yesterday, a piece that was circulating on Twitter, [a post by a farmer in Nebraska](#) on the American Corn Growers Association website, talking about extreme weather and the effect of increasing heat waves on the ability to grow corn — you’ve written about the fact that corn won’t reproduce above 95 degrees. And [Phil Aroneanu of 350.org](#) tweeted it, and said, “Not exactly radical enviros, American Corn Growers concerned about climate.” Which seems to be what you’re talking about. Midwest farmers becoming political allies, when this all starts to hit home.

**HERTSGAARD:** The caveat, I would say, is that we don’t need all of them. For every farmer like that there’s plenty of farmers who are listening to the US Farm Bureau, and unfortunately the US Farm Bureau — which has a very loud voice in rural affairs — is still mainly pushing a denialist line. OK, we need to work on that. But in the meantime, we also need to work with the farmers who get this. Because, in a very different way, they’re like the people I write about in Bangladesh. They’re on the front lines of this.

**WS:** And these battles are local and regional battles. There’s a sense among a lot of people that that’s where they need to be focusing. That’s not to say that we can just give up on national politics, that we can just give up on Washington — or even that we can give up on the international process — but that real progress is being made at the state and local level. You recently [wrote about California for Environment 360](#), and the aggressive steps they’re implementing to reduce emissions 80 percent by 2050.

**HERTSGAARD:** Tip O’Neill — you’re sitting almost in his old district — had this line, “all politics is local.” Now there’s a lot of different ways to interpret that, but one of the ways is illustrated by the Beyond Coal fight. When you build political power at the local level, that is really the only way that you can change votes in Washington. Especially if you’re swimming against the tide of big corporate money. I mean, it’s very easy for all of us to lambast Congress, and certainly I’ve done my share of it — but I also know, having been a reporter in Washington, just how difficult it is for a member of Congress to avoid the money train. You’ve got to raise so much money to stand for reelection that it’s almost impossible not to go to fundraisers and be dialing for dollars day after day after day. And human nature, and institutional dynamics, mean that those people are going to have sway over you.

The only way that corporate sway can be overcome is to organize at the local level. When you can organize enough people to shut down a coal plant, and to then force a real progressive restructuring of the local energy economy, believe me, that gets a politician’s attention. And then you can go to him or her and say, Senator, or Congressman, we really want your vote on this cap-and-dividend, or a carbon price, and if we don’t get it, we’re going to hold you accountable.

But the most important part of that California piece is at the end, where I say that if the rest of the country had done what California did over the past 40 years, we’d be well along toward solving the climate crisis. Here’s a situation where the 9th biggest economy in the world is doing really important things, and if the rest of the US had done it, not only would our own emissions be much lower, but we would’ve made a deal at Copenhagen. Don’t tell me that wouldn’t have made a difference.

**WS:** Your reporting makes it very clear what a mixed bag all of this is. There is progress. There are success stories out there. And it’s important to point them out. And yet, you don’t sugarcoat the reality of climate change either. As you [wrote in Slate](#), for the [Future Tense event on food and climate](#), even the most promising ecological agriculture success stories won’t matter if the climate gets to the point of the “unmanageable.” So, at the end of the day, we really do need that kind of Havelian — is that the right term? — vision, or hope.

**HERTSGAARD:** Or Mandelian, maybe.

**WS:** Right. Because it is going to take some kind of transformational politics.

**HERTSGAARD:** Absolutely, it’ll take transformational politics. But again, I go back to the transformations that have happened. If you talked to black Americans in, say, 1957, they would not have believed, most of them, what was about to happen. And most of them were not even involved in what was about to happen. It didn’t take all of them. And it didn’t fix everything.

But you can always find some reason to give up. That’s easy. What’s a lot harder is to carry on in the face of very difficult circumstances.

Again, [Kingsnorth's] idea that there’s no climate movement? That’s what we have to build — I agree totally with Bill McKibben on this — and we are building it. And one of the really hopeful things I saw at

Copenhagen, having gone to a lot of those events, was for the first time the emergence of a genuine, mass climate change movement. And, I'm sorry, they don't win right away. That's not how history works. You have to be a little more determined and patient than that. But when you look at history, you see that movements are what change politicians.

We have this choice, and yes, it takes a certain amount of resolve, but as soon as you begin to act, you change what seems inevitable. There's no guarantee. But it's no longer inevitable.

**WS:** You're writing [an editorial](#) for *The Nation's* Earth Day issue.

**HERTSGAARD:** I remind people of the real history of Earth Day, which is in danger of becoming this sort of Hallmark Card, empty ritual. I remind people that the first Earth Day put 20 million people in the street. It's what frightened Richard M. Nixon so that he felt like he had to pass what remains the world's most ambitious environmental legislation. We know this now because of the memoirs of his aides. He looked at those 20 million people in the streets — and it was against a backdrop, mind you, of many years of civil rights demonstrators in the streets, and antiwar demonstrators in the streets — and he saw 20 million people. And they were not long-haired kids, they were librarians, they were parents, they were churchgoers. They were little kids. They were middle America.

And Nixon saw that, and he immediately recognized, as a smart politician would, that this was both a threat and an opportunity. He was determined not to let Muskie, who he saw as the likely Democratic candidate in '72, have the environment issue. That's when he said, OK, we're going to steal a march on them, and he ended up creating the Environmental Protection Agency, environmental impact statements, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Air and Water Acts, all of the stuff that the rest of the world is now modeling their legislation on. All those things. Why? Nixon was treehugger? No. He was a politician.

We have to stop expecting our politicians to be saints, and recognize that they're politicians — and that they need *us to lead them*.

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