

# The Power of Story

An interview with Carl N. McDaniel,  
author of *Wisdom for a Livable Planet*

## ***Why did you write this book?***

Environmentalism is a word that's become very politicized – too many people think that “the environment” is the concern of a special interest group. All these issues I've mentioned in the book – toxic waste, biodiversity, population growth and economic sustainability and so forth – these environmental challenges affect everyone – no matter what political label you go by. One of the reasons I wrote this book is to make this case, and to do it by telling the story of one extraordinary person who has devoted his or her life to the resolution of that challenge.

## ***How did you choose which visionaries to write about in this book?***

Each visionary was chosen for his or her lifelong commitment to a major environmental challenge – one that appears impossible to address effectively. Remarkably, I only asked eight people; each agreed to share his or her life story with me. Most of the eight asked

why I chose them. I answered, “Because you are an optimist about the future of humanity.” Most responded that they were not optimistic, but that pessimism is not an adaptive strategy and besides, pessimism is no fun.

## ***So you feel that telling someone's story is more interesting than just talking about, say, the problem of toxic waste?***

Humans are story tellers; we love stories and we act on the stories that we deeply believe. I wrote this to tell stories that would help people grasp the issues before us – and that would propel them to action.

## ***How do you balance being both a scientist and an advocate?***

Since my science expertise (developmental biology) and my advocacy (population, biodiversity, climate, economics) are different, the balance is complicated because I am using the science of others to inform my assessments. Also, I am a passionate, animated person, which confounds perceptions further—the general mode of science is to be unemotional about the data. But, I want to wake people up about the ramifications of the data.

## ***What other books or stories about the environment have inspired you – and you would recommend to others?***

So many! From the classics like *Silent Spring* and *Sand County Almanac* to *The Future Life* by Edward O. Wilson and *The Green History of the World* by Clive Ponting. *The Spirit in the Gene: Humanity's Proud Illusion and the Laws of Nature*, by Reg Morrison is an amazing book that everyone should read. I've included other recommendations in the back of *Wisdom for a Livable Planet*.

***Your book mixes stark facts with hopeful stories of people taking practical action. Are you hopeful for the future of our modern civilization?***

The people profiled in this book express what I call true hopefulness. But I'm more of a pessimist, in many ways. We are in a situation similar to that faced by Ernest Shackleton in January 1915 when the *Endurance* was trapped in sea ice of the Weddell Sea and by Admiral Nimitz's navy in the spring of 1942 at Midway Island. Shackleton did not lose a man; Nimitz had a "miracle at Midway." What will we do?

***What do you hope readers will take away from your book?***

Scientific discussions continue, but the scientific consensus is that humanity's current pattern of habitation has exceeded the carrying capacity of Earth. We are a glorious life form, and as such, we are bound by the biological and physical principles that govern all life. The eight visionaries I've highlighted—and thousands more—have provided the guidelines to a durable future. The choice is clear: shift to an ecologically based pattern of habitation or bequeath to life, human and otherwise, an impoverished future for a long time to come.