

Penguin Chats | Creating Super Green Cities with Clark alumnus Denis Hayes

Transcript | March 2021

Rhonda Morin - Welcome to Penguin Chats, a Clark College Foundation production. I'm Rhonda Morin.

Clark alumnus Denis Hayes was the inspirational organizer of the first Earth Day in April 1970—an event that excited more than 20 million people to gather in cities across the nation. Today, as the head of the Bullitt Foundation, a conservation group in Seattle, he focuses on building resilient cities with structures that rely *less* on petroleum resources and *more* on reusable sources.

Denis Hayes - Ultimately, what we're trying to do is design a system which is not going to produce combustible plastics out of oil.

Rhonda Morin - In this edition of Penguin Chats, Denis Hayes talks about solutions to combustible plastics, pledges from big business to be net-carbon neutral, the dawn of the energy revolution and more. His comments come from a February 2021 virtual event called Super Green Cities, which is part of our Alumni Relations Presents series.

Andy Palmquist - Penguin Chats is brought to you in part by Ginn Group, Horenstein Law Group, Vesta Hospitality, Waste Connections of Washington, Arnerich Massena, Quail Homes and US Bank. Our platinum and gold sponsors are helping make extraordinary things happen at Clark College Foundation.

Rhonda Morin - When Denis Hayes was in his early 20s, he went on a quest to find his calling, hitchhiking around the world for a couple of years. His adventures took him throughout Africa; the Middle East; and finally to Southeast Asia.

Denis Hayes - It was a profoundly important period for me. But of relevance to tonight's talk, was really an awakening that I had to-- something that, 50 years later, almost 60 years later now seems pretty obvious.

Rhonda Morin - The big moment on his journey was when he realized the effects humans were having on the planet. He came to understand that we live inside ecosystems just like all other animals—but with a central difference.

Denis Hayes - We had tapped into relatively cheap, abundant energy and that that had given us some opportunities. And we had taken full advantage of some of those and abused others and that, partly as a consequence of that, we were getting ourselves into an increasing number of environmental problems.

I began to wonder how life on the planet might function if we too made a conversion away from reliance upon fossil fuels and to a reliance upon solar energy and what that would mean for the nature of our cities and for the nature of our buildings, our transportation systems, our industry.

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Rhonda Morin - Another way to say that is what if we *built* cities based on the *region's* ecosystems.

Denis Hayes - Ecosystems are very different depending upon where they're located. You should not build-- you would not find an ecosystem in Phoenix that is like an ecosystem in Vancouver, Washington. And yet, because we've had this cheap, abundant energy, we have tried to build pretty much exactly the same cities in Phoenix that we do in Vancouver or Portland. And what would happen if we didn't.

Rhonda Morin - Hayes grew up in Camas, Washington, where pollution from the town's paper mill permeated his childhood. Those formative years left an indelible mark on the future environmentalist. Later, when he returned to Clark College in Vancouver, he recalls how his instructors helped him harness that enthusiasm and turn it into critical thinking.

Denis Hayes - After leaving Clark I had the good fortune to be able to go to a number of quite fine institutions. I did my undergraduate work at Stanford and also went to Stanford Law School and business school and to Harvard for the Kennedy School of Government. But I can say that some of the teachers that I had at Clark were as superb as any teachers that I've ever encountered anywhere. They took a real interest in the students, took a real interest in me. I got to be on a first name basis with them and to really, as a result of probing questions, started to ask a whole lot of probing questions about the assumptions that I had taken on faith before then. It was really the first part of my intellectual awakening.

Rhonda Morin - In the years following that first ambitious Earth Day, a rapid succession of legislation— unanimously voted in at the federal level—such as the Clean Air Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, and others—put in place the framework around new corporate behavior. The rules require corporations to follow them or risk lawsuits. But—things are changing.

Denis Hayes - That has been shifting in the last few years, as a political faction in the United States and in some other countries has become increasingly, tragically, anti-environmental. And at the same time that that has been taking place, a number of corporate executives becoming increasingly concerned with sustainability and concerned with having companies that will be enduring for the next 20, 30, 50 years and recognize that they have to improve their behavior if that's going to happen.

Rhonda Morin - In general, the uptick in corporate responsibility in recent years has shifted to include their work forces, their consumers, their stakeholders and an acceptance of sustainability.

Denis Hayes - Microsoft has pledged that it will be net carbon neutral by 2030. And by 2050, it will have been sufficiently carbon negative that it will have taken out of the atmosphere as much carbon as it has put into the atmosphere during its entire corporate existence.

Rhonda Morin - Another is General Motors, which originally supported a lawsuit that undercut greenhouse gas obligations put in place by California. GM has committed to producing no cars that use internal combustion or diesel engines after 2035.

Denis Hayes – We're going to have everybody in our lunchroom use porcelain cups that they can wash. We're talking about serious, fundamental corporate commitments that are coming from a few places. They still have to deliver. But at least they're moving in the right direction and making very good sounding pledges.

Rhonda Morin - Despite how you feel about climate change, Hayes believes we are headed toward an energy revolution, which will fundamentally change how we get our energy—and how we use it once it's extracted. The endgame to the energy revolution is to stop making materials from petroleum.

Denis Hayes – Ultimately, what we're trying to do is design a system which is not going to be producing combustible plastics out of oil.

But we have, in recent times, seen more and more international focus upon what is termed the circular economy, where, once a product is pulled out of the ground, it remains in commerce, basically, forever. And you can get it, then you reuse it. And then you reengineer it, and re-torque it, and recycle it, and ultimately just keep it going. That's obviously much easier for metals than it is for, for example, wood. But as an aspirational goal, keeping it in circulation I think is preferable to combusting it.

Rhonda Morin - The world is an energy fiend; it gobbles up coal, oil, gas, wind, solar and other sources to power the services that we humans use every single day. Hayes thinks renewable energy can play a major role in satiating our energy appetite because wind and solar, for example, can be contained in storage facilities and then transmitted broadly to regions with less light and low wind. But, it'll take changes in behavior to drive down energy demands, he says, making renewable sources more attractive to meet the world's energy needs.

Denis Hayes – By 2050 the world is going to be 90% plus getting its energy from renewable resources, dominantly solar and wind, although we'll continue to produce a little bit more hydro than we are today. I think we're going to be seeing more and more geothermal, particularly deep geothermal, coming online.

And then finally, the thing that always gets overlooked in these conversations, but let me stomp on it with both feet-- going back to that night in Africa when I was thinking about the super efficiency with which nature uses energy because energy is relatively costly, we have to make these investments in efficiency. The whole concept of waste as a source of status has to somehow be abandoned. The fact that in order to get from one point to another you're going to be driving a two-ton sports utility vehicle to transport a 160-pound person is just literally crazy. And much of the world is now moving away from that.

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Rhonda Morin - Back at Clark College, there are many more environmental fields of study these days than when Hayes was a student. His advice for Clark students interested in climate science is to look at studying ecological economics, environmental history or even law. Other advice that he offers extends to all of us: think about your daily choices to reduce waste—from taking public transportation, or walking or biking, to the food you eat and composting what you don't.

Denis Hayes – When you're buying things at a cafeteria or bringing food from home, it turns out that, after buildings and transportation, food is the biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions and overall environmental destruction of the country. We tend to ignore our food, but it's really important. Make sure that anything that is wasted that is not used by the end of the day is either delivered to somebody who needs it, composted or something, that none of that goes into the trash.

The whole thing, I suppose, comes down to a matter of integrity. When Mahatma Gandhi was trying to bring about heroic changes in India, he quite famously said that the ends are the means in the making. You have to live the values it is that you're proclaiming. And if you do that, one, you are more motivated yourself to give it your all. But second, nobody viewing you is going to see you as a hypocrite. Clark can do its own small steps across the way, and every student can to make sure that the lives that they are leading are congruent with their values.

Rhonda Morin - If you'd like to watch the full interview with Clark alumnus Denis Hayes, visit Clark College Foundation's YouTube Channel.

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Rhonda Morin - That does it for this edition of Penguin Chats. Thanks for listening. I'm Rhonda Morin