



Pioneers of the Planet

Episode Five: Barbara Bramble

Madhyama Subramanian - I'm Madhyama Subramanian. What does it take to champion the cause of environmental protection and development? More so, is it a life long commitment? In Pioneers of the Planet, we talk to people who have some of the answers because it's just what they have done, most of their lives. My guest for today is Barbara Bramble. Barbara has had a long and esteemed career in environmental policy making in the United States. She is the senior advisor for international affairs at the National Wildlife Federation. She was an environmental advisor to the US president Jimmy Carter. She was one of the original teams of NGOs that organised civil society participation at the Earth Summit. She has also been a consultant to government's and NGO's in Brazil, and Mexico. And currently she is Chair of the Board of the roundtable on Biofuels. Welcome Barbara, it's a pleasure having you with us today. As we have heard, you have a huge store house of experience, where did it all really begin?

Barbara Bramble – As with so many other people, and I'm sure you've found this with your other guests; it started when I was a kid. My father was in the Foreign Service of the United States and so I travelled to various parts of the world where I saw that the privileged life that people had in the United States was not the norm and that most people have much more difficult problems and the future of the world really depends on finding solutions to these problems. So I started learning about poverty and the situation for women and healthcare for children when I was nine years old. And then my father decided that he wanted to be essentially a subsistence farmer so when he was working in the state department in the day time, we were farming our little plot in the evenings. So I learned about farming and about plucking chickens and about making our own food from a very early age. So when you put those two together, I don't think I had much choice.

Madhyama Subramanian – That's fascinating... So you have started at a very early age, you've had a very hands-on experience with nature and the soil. You've been

through policy making, conferences and buildings, so what do you feel is the state of the environment movement today?

Barbara Bramble – Well, the problem with the environmental movement is that it comes and goes in waves. And so I've now lived through three, maybe four of these waves and so where the state of the environmental movement is today, you have to see it in relation to where it was a few years ago and hope that it will be continuing its growth into the future but Realism tells me that it's going to go in waves. So we've had the original Earth Day phenomenon back in 1970, which really brought me to the environmental movement, we had the enormous outcry around the spill of the Exxon Valdez in 1988 and the assassination of Chico Mendez, forest hero from Brazil in that same year and the burning of Yellowstone in that same year which led to the next big wave which culminated in the Rio Earth Summit and then everything crashed again after that. And so we're on an upswing right now, that's what I have seen. We hope we can continue it for another few years because we need to get a climate treaty in place, we need to get the beginning of implementation of this climate treaty, but I do not pretend to think that it will always be on an upswing. We're going to have to consolidate our gains right now and live through the next down turn and stick with it long enough to have another upturn.

Madhyama Subramanian – Any important lessons that we could learn from any of the previous waves that you have mentioned that are relevant to us today? And maybe a lesson that we are overlooking?

Barbara Bramble – Well unfortunately the one lesson I understand is that it takes tragedy. People do not concentrate their minds in good times on environmental issues or poverty reduction or long term problems. It's much more fun to live for today and to not worry about the future. So unfortunately what is going to be needed to actually build this new low-carbon future and the green jobs that we need, we've seen it now in the economic downturn, the enormous recession that is going on; that's actually helping, and we need to pay attention to the stronger storms that are happening, I think hurricane Katrina a few years ago in the United States was an enormously important phenomenon, but we're going to unfortunately need more of those. And so I don't have good lessons, the lesson that we have to persist and persist and persist and take advantage of the events when they happen.

Madhyama Subramanian – You were with the Jimmy Carter administration which did support environmental protection...

Barbara Bramble – Absolutely.

Madhyama Subramanian – Now, the Obama administration offers a lot of promise, any parallels do you see in the approach?

Barbara Bramble – That's a very good question. In the Jimmy Carter administration, that was a culmination of one of the early waves. So there had been a great build up of public understanding of the need for laws and regulations to control the worst excesses of pollution. Which, at that time, were fairly easy, simpleminded kinds of pollution. You could see the air pollution in the air, you could see the foam in the streams for the water pollution and so our clean air and clean water problems were born out of very visible, backyard problems that everybody could see. So Jimmy Carter was riding on the wave at that time and he supported an enormous number of new laws on every topic from surface mining to noise pollution to technologies on air and water that I mentioned earlier. Energy efficiency, fuel efficiency for automobiles. Numbers of bills that were passed then had not been seen before; it really was quite astonishing. But I think what happened that was not good was that the rest of us environmental policy makers and lawyers and activists, we thought that that was a permanent majority for these issues and we started working on the more difficult to understand issues. Like toxic waste and a number of things that became very detailed and arcane. And we started talking it terms of DES permits and things that normal people could not understand and I think we lost our way. We lost the popular understanding because we were talking a language that was not anything a real person could understand. So Carter championed these things, he as an engineer actually knew what was needed but we didn't have the majority of the people with us. And the new President who won the election of 1980, Ronald Reagan was able to take advantage of that and started to dismantle most of the important reforms. Now they did didn't get very far but they did stop the advance, totally stopped it in its tracks. So we had to wait until there was another build up of obvious problems and so I think the lesson is that we need to have understandable issues. Well the thing about President Obama is that he communicates so beautifully about what people are really trying to say for themselves. They're trying to figure out answers to

problems and he is able to articulate them and he brings a great intelligence; his own personal understanding of all of these issues is very detailed. But unlike President Carter he doesn't dwell on the details. He understands the issue, he steps back and he explains it for the public. And I think for that reason we are going to have some extremely good and intelligent decisions made about really serious problems, he's going to add a lot of service, opportunities for young people, that's going to make a big change; get young people out into nature. For the last twenty years, our kids have been sitting in front of television and computer screens. And many of them are getting sick because of it, they're getting fat, they're going to end up with diabetes and heart disease at a very young age, we need to get them back out into the world and I think President Obama can help lead that.

Madhyama Subramanian – So what do you foresee at the Copenhagen summit in December?

Barbara Bramble – Well I'm working very hard along with all of my colleague to pass a law in the United States that would begin our slow path to a green future. But until the United States passes that law, I don't know what we can foresee in Copenhagen, so I'm holding my breath. I think it's going to be very difficult to pass a law in the United States that will be good enough. One thing about the US, we don't go to treaty negotiations with the idea that we'll sign something and then we'll try to figure how to implement it back home. A lot of other countries do that, but unfortunately it is a tradition that the US does not ever negotiate a treaty that isn't already law in the United States. And it's probably unfortunate but that's just the tradition and we're not going to change it this year, so unless we have a strong enough law in the United States forcing the real change here, I don't think we can pull off an ambitious treaty in Copenhagen. But that's not to say that we won't get one eventually, we will keep working on it as long as it takes in the US and then as soon as that goes, we'll be able to have a strong treaty. I'm hoping it's this year.

Madhyama Subramanian – You were one of the people who had the vision of incorporating civil society into policy discussions. What was the vision behind something like that?

Barbara Bramble – Well when I started working on international economic policy regarding the environment, it was back in the early 80's, it became very clear that

much of what was wrong with projects that were financed by the World Bank and the inter-American and Asian development banks, was exactly that they were imposed from the outside on populations and communities, who perhaps understood better what they really needed, so the development didn't work. So you had the ironic, really sad result of many of these projects that they were economically ineffective, because they weren't what the people needed and they were at the same time destroying some of the environmental and natural resource base that the population needed for the life they could build for themselves. So you ended up making actually already poor people, absolutely destitute. So we could see that involving the understanding that local people have and the kind of enthusiasm that they would bring to a project that was really something that was meant for them, that they had helped to design, was the only way to make development successful.

Madhyama Subramanian – But has it really worked? Are you happy with the way it's turning out?

Barbara Bramble – Well let's say that we started at a point of closed decision making that you would not recognise today, no one could imagine today what it was like in the 70's and 80's, so while it's not there yet, the actual details of how specific people may be involved in designing project x or y may not be perfect, it is orders of magnitude better than it was then. So let's keep working for continued improvements, but the role of major groups in these international negotiations is accepted everywhere and back in those days it was absolutely a closed system.

Madhyama Subramanian – So, what are the days when you really feel frustrated with the way things are?

Barbara Bramble – Well what I feel frustrated about is that we never seem to get it all the way right, we have one idea of what needs to be fixed and work really hard at fixing that one and then we find there's another problem. We were working originally on environmental reforms that I mentioned in the 80's and then structural adjustment was invented as a way to oppress people. So then people started to work on that and then we moved on to another whole set of problems and we discovered the hole in the o-zone layer which we didn't even know about and climate change became a real phenomenon. And so every time I'd turn around, there's a new set of problems

and that's what frustrates me. And we've made enormous progress on the things we knew about back then.

Madhyama Subramanian – So is that what drives you?

Barbara Bramble – Well I guess what drives me is that the friends that I've made in every sector of society trying to work on these things continues to increase. The circles are widening of the people in every walk of life who are really trying to make a difference, and you can't quit on wonderful people like that.

Madhyama Subramanian – Great, one last question, what is the most important lesson from what you've learnt from when you were nine and when you were working on the farm, that you have carried with you?

Barbara Bramble – Gosh, well I think the most important lesson might be to always look outside your narrow, personal, comfortable space in life because everything looks a little different when you try to understand how it must seem from someone else's vantage point. I think that is what has driven my life and it's the lack of that that was the great failure of governments, of perhaps business leaders who don't understand impacts of what they do on others. How they're actions must look to others. That certainly was lacking in the last eight years in the United States, that total arrogant misunderstanding of everyone else on the face of the earth because of not having any experience in what life looks like or what truth looks like from someone else's vantage point.

Madhyama Subramanian – Thank you so much Barbara, it was a pleasure having you with us on the show.

Barbara Bramble – Thank you for having me.