

Health Insights Today

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When Telling the Environment's Story, Health Effects are the Key Interview with Simran Sethi

By Daniel Redwood, DC

Simran Sethi is an award-winning journalist and associate professor at the University of Kansas School of Journalism and Mass Communications, where she teaches courses on sustainability and environmental communications. She is currently writing a book on contemporary environmentalism to be published by Harper Collins in Summer 2010.



Named one of the top ten eco-heroes of the planet by the UK's *Independent* and lauded as an "environmental messenger" by *Vanity Fair*, Sethi has contributed numerous segments to *Nightly News* with Brian Williams, CNBC, the Oprah Winfrey Show, Today Show, Ellen DeGeneres Show, Martha Stewart Show and the History Channel. She blogs about sustainability and life cycle analysis for *The Huffington Post* and *Alternet*. She has been a featured guest on NPR and is the host of the Emmy-award winning PBS documentary, "A School in the Woods."

Sethi serves on the Sustainability Advisory Board for the city of Lawrence, Kansas. She holds an M.B.A. in sustainable business from the Presidio School of Management and graduated cum laude with a B.A. in Sociology and Women's Studies from Smith College.

Which environmental issues are most urgent at this time and to what extent does the public, in the United States and elsewhere, understand the urgency?

If you had asked me that question a couple of years ago, I would have said climate change. But since I moved from New York City to Lawrence, Kansas, three years ago, I've had a real education in understanding how people feel connected or disconnected from the issue of climate change. What I talk about now is understanding our water usage and the fact that our drinkable water is currently finite, that we really need to think about ways to conserve water. Over the next couple of years, 38 out of the 50 states in the United States will be suffering from water shortages of some degree.

I think that we need to really consider, for the U.S. population and global population, our consumption. What's often talked about is population, but what's more significant is that the United States comprises about four percent of the global population but we use upwards of 20 percent of the world's resources. Whether we're talking about petroleum or paper, or generating greenhouse gas emissions, these are all things that the U.S. (now with China and India not too far behind) plays a huge role in. For me, being of Indian origin and recognizing the challenges around population growth, I think *the biggest challenge we face right now is people trying to emulate a Western lifestyle*. So what we need to do, as Americans, is take a leadership position in redefining how we consume and what we consume. I think that's the real opportunity to reach people.

Returning to your emphasis on water, this is not just about rainfall, is it? It's also about using up the water contained in the underground aquifers.

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Absolutely.

And here in Kansas, that hits very close to home because the massive Ogallala Aquifer is being drained at unsustainable rates. What have you learned, living in Kansas, that you didn't know previously about water?

I have learned that we are using too much of it. I came from New York City, where the carbon and ecological footprints [per person] are pretty small. But here, the conventional farming techniques that are employed are very water intensive. The crops we grow, ranging from corn to soybeans to wheat, are water-intensive crops. The push for corn ethanol has been really misguided. So yes, water is not just about rainfall; drought depends on how we use water. And there are certain things that we believe we need to have – like green lawns – that don't make a lot of sense in certain climates.

We are starting to get a better sense of that fact that water is finite. Planning policies need to reflect that. But for the most part, local governments don't seem to have taken too strong a stance on this. This is one of things that we addressed in the climate plan for the city of Lawrence, that we really need to look at how we're using our resources and how we're planning our cities. The Climate and Energy Project, the nonprofit that's an offshoot of The Land Institute, has also started to talk about water in relation to climate change, which relates to conventional agricultural measures as well. I'm learning that this hits a lot closer to home here, and we're not just talking about drinking water. It's industry, it's public health, it's a host of issues that have not been considered as fully as they need to be. Especially in an ag state! We need to be concerned with how available these resources are.

In the United States, and perhaps elsewhere as well, we currently face converging crises in the health, environmental and economic spheres. Do you see these as interconnected?

Absolutely. Environmental issues are issues of public health, economic prosperity, patriotism and more, because we rely on our natural resources to sustain us. When we abuse our resources, we suffer the health consequences of doing so. So, for me, these issues are not separate; everything falls within our planetary ecosystem.

The biggest challenge I have as a journalist is trying to help people make these interconnections. Media is notorious for trying to squeeze a little bit of information into a little bit of space and not providing a lot of context. It's a real hardship to try to explain climate change in a 250-word blog post or a two-and-a-half minute news story. I have tried to do both and I can tell you it is not easy. I think these stories warrant a much deeper conversation.

Are you optimistic about our avoiding environmental catastrophe?

Sometimes I am not, but most of the time I am optimistic. On one of the television shows I worked for, I interviewed a woman named Sylvia Earle. She's a marine biologist in her seventies who was the first woman to walk untethered on the ocean floor. She was named one of *Time's* heroes of the planet. I leaned in to her during one of the breaks and said, "Dr. Earle, 90 percent of our fish stocks are depleted. What do we do? I mean, how do you keep going?" She's this spunky woman with bright blue eyes, and she said, "Simran, it's the 10 percent."

Keeping our eye on the possibility and the hope of what we can do is not always easy but I think it's always essential. That's where I try to come back to and it's what I try to inspire my students to do. There's always that moment in the semester where they realize, "Well, gee, everything I eat, the car I drive, the clothes I wear, everything has this terrible impact." For most people, it is not a viable solution to pull yourself off the grid and go live in a yurt. But it is

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possible to be conscious about the decisions you make and recognize that everything does have an impact, and to look at ways that your impact can perhaps be diminished.

To what extent is food production and distribution, and the choice of which foods we eat, an environmental issue? And I would ask you to specifically address that in the context of animal agriculture, since Kansas is one of the world's centers for animal agriculture.

Don Stull, a cultural anthropologist at the University of Kansas describes the area of Garden City, Holcomb and Dodge City as the Golden Triangle of Meat Packing. This year in my class on media and the environment, we used food as the lens. We focused completely on food and agriculture, which I don't think are separate. But in some people's minds, ag is different from food.

Food is a universal. We have to eat, we can't get away from it. And the choices we make have varying impacts. For a lot of students, it was an awakening to realize the amount of land, water and greenhouse gas emissions (particularly methane) that are generated through the raising of livestock. You can think about a meat packing plant in the abstract and think that it isn't very pretty, but we talked to farmers. We started to get a better sense of what it means to make that choice. A couple of people in the class are vegetarians and they were able to share their insights as to why that was important for them, in terms of a personal ethic as well as an environmental responsibility.

In terms of the research that you were encouraging students to do more of, did you look into the 2006 United Nations report, "Livestock's Long Shadow"?

Yes, we read the summary of that report. This is information that we weren't talking about just a few years ago. Everyone was talking about carbon dioxide emissions without really looking at methane and the concentrated nature of that greenhouse gas emission. For students, it has been a real awakening to understand this. But they tend to be on budgets so they face a struggle in which they say, "I want to eat better, but my pocketbook only allows this much, so what am I going to do?" There was one student who came in saying that he ate burgers every single day. By the end of the semester, he was eating fewer burgers, but more importantly, he was really clear on what the supply chain was that brought that burger to his plate. He was recognizing not only the animal that had given up his life but the resources that had been depleted, what the farmers had been paid, and how the workers had been treated in the factory. Hopefully that information will stay in his mind and he will make better choices.

The Leopold study that was done at the University of Iowa, indicating that our food travels over 1500 miles from farm to fork, was surprising to students. We live in an ag state, yet our food is still traveling these huge distances to reach us. Why is there this disconnect? Why is our food system so out of whack? Where can we look and what can we do as citizens to start to make a difference?

The British medical journal, The Lancet, recently ran a major article which concluded that global climate change is the greatest health threat of the 21st century. Is that your sense and, if so, why is this not more widely recognized yet?

You know, climate change has needed a much better public relations company. I'm making a joke here, but someone needs to do a lot better PR for the planet than we've had. Climate change has been an extraordinarily divisive issue. Media didn't do a good job, NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] didn't do a good job...

Climate change is an extraordinary health concern. It doesn't get talked about enough because climate change, in general, has not been spoken about in ways that resonate with enough people. We talk about the number of degrees

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of the planet heating up, and we talk about sea level rise, but we have not made this tangible for people. If you say the temperature will rise here in Kansas and we will see increased rates of malaria because the mosquito population will proliferate, then that's something that people can get their heads around.

But abstractions have not worked for people. We thought that maybe – when I say we, I mean environmental storytellers – that *facts* would really engage people. But I don't think that people can tell the temperature difference between [global climate change of] one degree Celsius and two degrees Celsius. I'm not convinced that telling people that swapping out light bulbs will be the equivalent of taking a million cars off the road, or two million cars off the road, actually means anything to them. It sounds like a lot, don't get me wrong. But speaking for myself, it doesn't stay with me. I can't discern the difference in those orders of magnitude. I think the more we can talk about public health, the better chance we have of actually engaging people.

From your perspective, what are some of the public health issues that might connect in a visceral way with people who may just be engaged in other activities and not thinking about this? What is there with people's health that they might connect to? Not having enough water to drink, that's one. Not having enough water to grow food with, that's another...

See, you're on a great roll. Not being able to breathe the air, that's another one. The pollution. In the 1970s, when we galvanized around the Clean Air Act, *seeing smog* is what galvanized people. We have to make the invisible visible for people. Also, we can't keep talking about everything over these long time horizons. There are some great reports that have come out for the state of Kansas, and for other states, about what will happen in response to climate change by the year 2100.

When we'll all be dead.

Exactly. I want to know, what's going to happen in 2010? Will I still have a job, will I have food to eat? It's important to break some of this stuff down and say listen, this puts us on a certain trajectory. Here's what happens to our soil, here's what happens to our food, here's what happens to the air that we all need to breathe, here's what happens when we site another coal plant in our community. Here are the impacts that coal plant will have on drinking water. We don't need to actually use climate change as the conversation starter because that's where a lot of people have been turned off.

I can argue against a coal plant on a number of grounds that have absolutely nothing to do with the planet warming. I think that's what we need to start do more, to build bridges to constituencies that are simply turned off rather than trying to convince them that climate change is real, which I think is a very challenging thing to do because it has become so politically and culturally loaded. I would start to talk about some of those common cares. And I think that what you just cited and what I just cited are the best ways to do it. Public health is so unifying. None of us want to be sick. None of us want our kids to be sick. A lot of us don't want the animals to be sick or the plants to be sick either. That's something that people can really feel.

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