

# THE PRINCETON PACKET



SOLUTIONS

By Huck Fairman

## Bill McKibben talk offers hope, direction and dire warnings

Environmentalist Bill McKibben, an author, distinguished scholar and founder of 350.org, came to town the other night. Introduced by fellow environmentalist Professor Michael Oppenheimer, he stopped during his national speaking tour to talk to an expectant audience at Richardson Auditorium eager to hear what hope and direction he might offer on the environmental and political crises we face.

Beginning on a relatively soft note, McKibben told the audience he was here in conjunction with both the Princeton Environmental Institute and the Princeton Art Museum's exhibit, *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment*, which he urged all to go see. His support arises from his observation that art, or simply images,

can have a real impact. He reminded us of how the first photos of Earth from space and the Moon revealed that our beautiful blue and white planet floats essentially alone in what amounts to a dark infinity.

Those photos opened peoples' eyes to the fact that this planet is our only home and we must take better care of it. McKibben also touted the value of photos of people around the world protesting the desecration of our planet brought on by fossil fuels, electric power generation, heating and cooling, manufacturing, and governments – despite our having alternatives.

Sadly, he reminded us, that while our cultural heritage has been recorded and expressed through a rich array of art, we are, and have been, destroying the very world our art celebrates.

But, he also reminded us that individuals can make an impact too, Rachel Carson's books that stirred a generation, David Brower's founding of the Sierra Club and the idea that wilderness was something that merited preservation.

McKibben then inserted several grave warnings. First, there is no longer any place on Earth that is not untrammeled by man. And secondly, in efforts to preserve life as we've known it, we are in an immense fight against destructive forces. A fight we are losing.

If we need evidence of this, the latest IPCC report warns that we have only a few years to begin making significant changes. If one doubts that report, one need simply acknowledge the fact that the seven strongest storms on record have all occurred since 2006. Rising temperatures and ocean levels are already having their very serious impacts.

If we do not succeed in making the

needed changes, he predicted that we will see more of the repercussions that helped launch both the Honduran Caravan and the civil war in Syria. These two upheavals were set in motion by draughts devastating agriculture, which in turn helped ignite violence and political divisions. As agriculture in those regions became unsustainable, life there became impossible.

To reverse these trends, we will need to find and organize new levels of solidarity. And, McKibben added, surviving will also require enormous economic changes.

One sign of needed change is New York State's filing charges against Exxon, asserting that the oil company downplayed to its share holders the impacts of climate change upon its business and the environment.

But McKibben warned that these challenges to the fossil fuel industry and the financial sector that supports them will face push back. The looming fights will be about money and power – neither of which those industries and their allies will willingly relinquish. We, the small but many, are facing the fewer but large and rich. History, he observed, has long been the story of man fighting man. Now however, the fight for our future is man versus nature. Will man change or will he force nature to change unalterably?

To preserve the world as we know it – and again, the IPCC report states we don't have much time – McKibben alerted us that we must change the zeitgeist. While we now have the technology to effect the necessary changes, we need the popular and political will. We are no longer facing a sooner-the-better situation, but a sooner-or-never situation.

In an aside, he revealed that Princeton

University has not yet divested its investments in the fossil fuel industry. The audience erupted at this, supporting his implication that it is time for the university to do so. It is ironic that on one hand the university has made strides to reduce its emissions while it still supports the fossil fuel industry. Perhaps this is emblematic of the divisions that threaten civilization.

So how do we win this fight? McKibben affirmed that we need public support and pressure. And we need artists to help rally that support, by expressing both the dangers and the solutions.

In short, he urged that we need to do everything we can, including turning to green power, voting in carbon taxes, collecting and sequestering the carbon already in the atmosphere, and perhaps most important of all, exerting the political will to keep carbon in the ground.

He noted, additionally, that among the most important and far reaching expressions of this need to change was Pope Francis' 2nd. Encyclical, *Laudato Si'* whose subtitle is, "On care of our common home." But aside from the Pope, too few political leaders have led the effort. We, the people, need to change that.

With this message in mind, McKibben ended with a story from Sweden. There, a fifteen-year-old young lady responded to her parents' passivity by saying, "If you're not going to do anything, then I won't either. I won't go to school." And instead, she seated herself on a chair outside of the Swedish Parliament, explaining that she would move when they did, on this most essential issue.