

Changing attitudes

Bill McKibben has pursued the truth about global warming for more than 25 years. It's up to all of us to catch up.

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

No matter where you live on the planet, you are most certainly noticing intense and changing weather patterns. There is much debate about what that means and how to interpret all of the empirical data that scientists have collected for decades.

Bill McKibben has been writing and lecturing on the topic for more than 25 years, practically introducing global warming to a new generation. More recently, he has participated in and organized acts of civil disobedience to bring attention to the global warming crisis.

Last month, a leaked draft of the United Nations upcoming report of the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stated that scientists are convinced that human activity is behind the increase in global temperatures.

McKibben is currently the Schumann Distinguished Scholar at Middlebury College in Vermont. He volunteers for 350.org, a climate change awareness and activist group that he founded in 2007.

I first asked him about his experience many years ago, working on story about homelessness for *The New Yorker*, which is also how he happened to meet his wife, author Sue Halpern.

Bill McKibben: I've done a lot of reporting on homelessness for *The New Yorker*. This was back in the days when homelessness was still a phenomenon in America, at least in the way that we thought about it.

At the time, we thought about it as a crisis. It needed to be covered all the time in the media. And we thought it was like a new thing that was going to go away, that we would, as a society, quickly figure out that we didn't want hundreds of thousands of people living outside.

I wrote some pieces about it and I spent some time living as a homeless person. I also started and ran a homeless shelter in the basement of my church that served 10 men each night.

My (now) wife had been doing a lot of fundraising for groups that were working on the homelessness crisis – that is how we met.

One of the great tragedies is that people have stopped thinking about homelessness as a crisis and have started thinking about it as something that just happens. It is just an indelible part of American life. There are those of us old enough to remember that that wasn't always the case. That it was shocking when it first started emerging.

Sue Zalokar: *What was the experience like – sleeping on the street?*

B.M.: It added up to weeks I stayed outside. My editor asked me to find out what it was like (to be homeless) and in those days, at *The New Yorker*, there was plenty of time to do things. I'm trying to think about the various places that I lived actually. The Armory close to 158th Street. In those days, if I'm remembering this right, that place slept 5,000 people a night, if you can imagine

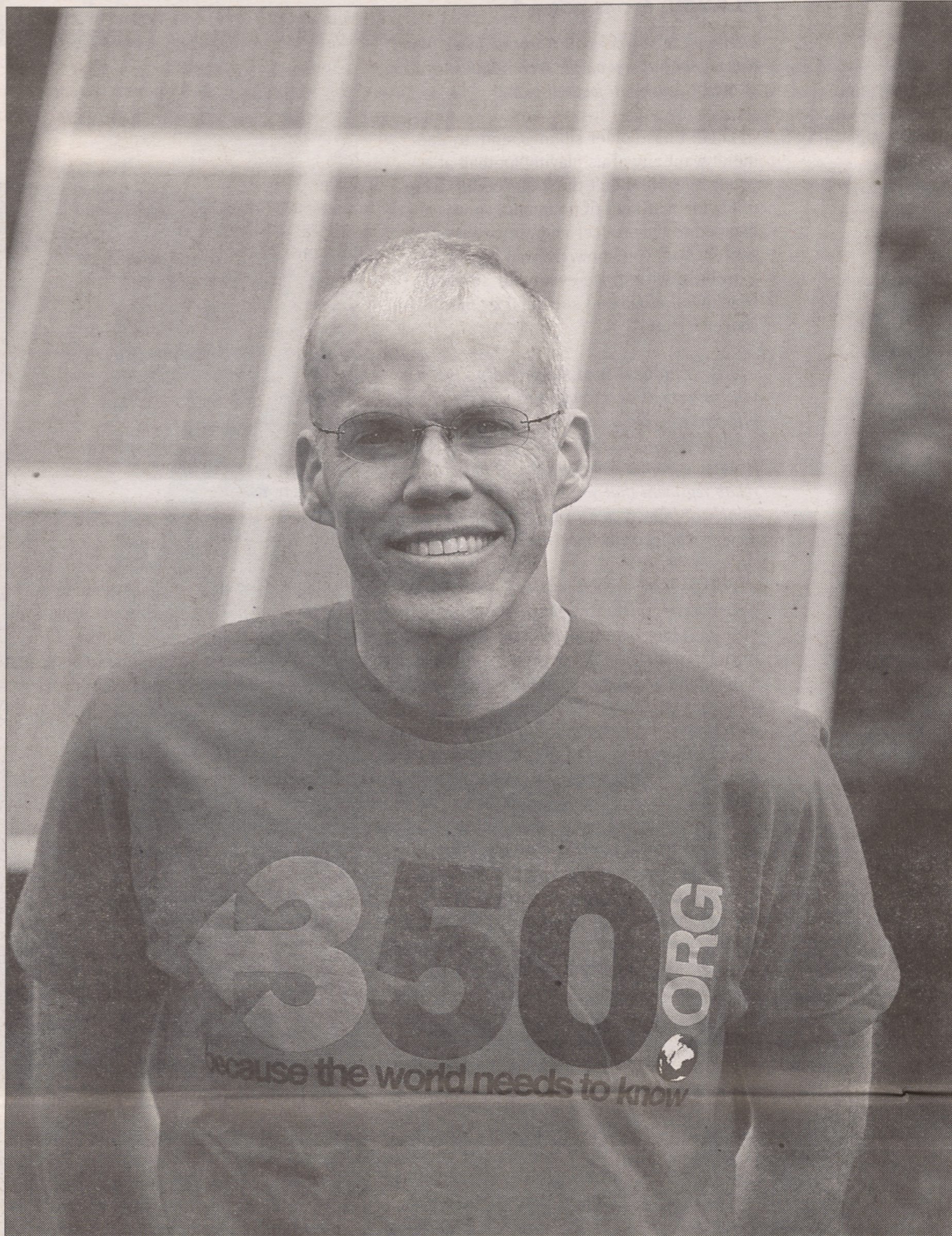


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BILL MCKIBBEN

that. It was a pretty remarkable and Dickensian operation. I spent some time at another place called Palace Hotel. Which was one of the last of the real Bowery flophouses in New York. In those days, if you had \$3, you could have a cot. They were all lined up next to one another with men sleeping as though in one long bed. If you had \$5, you could have a cot inside a little chicken wire cage – which for obvious reasons was preferable. I didn't generally have \$5.

One of my take aways from that experience was that being homeless was one of the hardest jobs in the world. I was never so tired.

S.Z.: *You've said that "it's already too late to prevent global warming. What we have to do now is learn how to deal with the reality." What is the reality?*

B.M.: Well, it is too late to prevent it altogether, but it is not too late to keep it from getting worse than it can get. We've raised the temperature one degree so far and that's going to cause us untold problems. We're almost certainly going to raise the temperature two degrees – there is already enough momentum in this system to all but guarantee that. That will cause us more than twice as many problems.

At one degree, we have already melted the Arctic. So that should give you some idea of the stakes that we are playing with. There is no happy outcome. We're probably still at a place where we can maintain the planet. But that only happens if we take swift action – much swifter than governments are planning – to get us off fossil fuel. If we don't, the same science that told us about one degree now tells us with confidence that it will be four or five degrees before the century is out. I'm talking Celsius here, so that would be eight or nine degrees Fahrenheit. So, the stakes are really high. We have to prevent that change from happening even as we're

adapting to the change that we can no longer prevent.

S.Z.: *2012 was the hottest year on record since we started keeping track. What do the facts tell us about the meaning of this?*

B.M.: It's a very good year to think about. It got really hot in the U.S. and there were two very dramatic results. One is that we can no longer grow food in the most fertile land on earth. It just got too hot in the summer of 2012 to grow corn in Iowa across the grain belt. Beyond a certain temperature, it is too hot for corn to fertilize. The price of grain went through the roof and a lot of poor people around the world had a lot less to eat than they wanted to as a result.

Another dramatic thing that happened – well there were a bunch of dramatic things – was wildfire season and this season has already been worse.

The other truly dramatic event was Hurricane Sandy. It was the lowest barometric pressure ever recorded North of Cape Hatteras. It was the largest wind field we've ever measured in a hurricane.

If anybody ever had any doubt before that whether climate change was a serious threat to a highly developed technological civilization, watching the New York City subway system fill with seawater should have answered that question once and for all.

S.Z.: *What effect does climate change have on poor people?*

B.M.: For poor people everywhere, it is particularly hard. A study came out in January from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NOAA. It said that we've already reached the point where it is hot and humid enough that people's ability to labor and be outdoors is cut about 10

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