

BILL MCKIBBEN ENCOURAGES STUDENTS TO BECOME ACTIVISTS

Jennifer J. Liskow'02G*
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PHOTO BY JODIE ANDRUSKEVICH

“If I can do this kind of work as an activist, so can you,” Bill McKibben told students attending a First Year Seminar program in October. Twenty years ago, when McKibben was 27, he wrote *The End of Nature*, the first book on global warming. “My naïve thought was that people would read it and go do what needed to be done,” he said. That didn’t happen.

Two years ago, McKibben decided he needed to do something beyond speaking and writing about climate change. He organized a five-day march across Vermont, ending in a rally where marchers demanded that politicians sign a petition to cut carbon emissions 80% by the year 2050.

Next, McKibben and six college students began the Step It Up campaign. They e-mailed people to ask them to organize demonstrations on April 14. The result: 1,400 demonstrations in all 50 states—the largest day of environmental activism since the first Earth Day.

Since then, scientists have determined that the greatest amount of carbon that can safely be in the atmosphere is 350 parts per million. “Anything above that means we’re in grave danger. We’re already at 380 and we’re going up 2 parts per million a year,” McKibben said. “But at least we have a number—we have one powerful fact about the world we live in.”

World leaders are meeting in Copenhagen to develop a follow-up to the Kyoto Protocol. “That treaty will be our last chance to really do something about climate change,” McKibben said. He and his Step It Up collaborators encourage people to publicize the number we need to reach to reduce the risk of dramatic climate change to put pressure on negotiators around the world who will participate in the talks in Copenhagen.

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McKibben told the students in the audience, “You people are particularly well-situated to understand what I’m talking about if you pay attention. In college, you live as humans have lived for the last thousands of years—as a community.” ■

* **JENNIFER LISKOW** is Rivier’s Assistant Director of Marketing and Communications and teaches in the College’s Professional Communications program. Jennifer earned her bachelor’s in English and communications from Notre Dame College in Manchester, N.H. in 1996. In 2002, she completed her master’s in writing and literature at Rivier. She began writing in junior high school; since then, she has had poems, short stories, features and essays published. She serves on the Board of Directors for NH Roller Derby, the state’s first competitive flat-track roller derby league.