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A Conversation on Climate Change with Conservation International's M. Sanjayan

Ethics & International Affairs Interviews

M. Sanjayan, Zach Dorfman

Audio

In late June, "Ethics & International Affairs" senior editor Zach Dorfman sat down with M. Sanjayan, senior scientist at Conservation International, at the Aspen Ideas Festival to discuss our climate-changed world, and why--on some days at least--he's hopeful about our environmental future.

Transcript

ZACH DORFMAN: Hello, and welcome to a special episode of our *Ethics & International Affairs* interview series sponsored by Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs. I'm Zach Dorfman, senior editor of *Ethics & International Affairs*, the council's quarterly journal, which is now in its 29th year, and is published by Cambridge University Press.

I'm here today at the [Aspen Ideas Festival](#) with M. Sanjayan, a leading conservation scientist, writer, and Emmy-nominated news contributor focused on the role of conservation and improving human well-being.

Welcome, Sanjayan. It's great to have you with us.

M. SANJAYAN: Thank you, good to be here.

ZACH DORFMAN: Sanjayan is currently executive vice president and senior scientist at Conservation International. He is also the host of the television series *EARTH: A New Wild*, produced by National Geographic Television and Passion Pictures. Sanjayan is also a Clinton Global Initiative senior advisor, a Catto Fellow at the Aspen Institute, and a member of National Geographic Society's Explorer's Council.

Sanjayan has appeared on numerous programs on the Discovery Channel, CBS, and the BBC, among other outlets. He has published peer-reviewed works in journals like: *Nature*, *Science*, and *Conservation Biology*. Sanjayan holds a Master's degree from the University of Oregon and a doctorate from the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Let's begin. You've written that nature conservation is necessary and essential for the persistence and improvement of human life on our planet. What do you mean by that? Should we refocus our conservation efforts around the effects of environmental degradation on human life?

M. SANJAYAN: First of all, thanks for interviewing me.

When you're in a place like where we are now, which is so close to nature, it's very easy to fall into the trap to think that nature's something pristine and beautiful in faraway places, something relatively untrammled. And that it's our job for a higher moral purpose, or a sense of responsibility and stewardship to the planet—and to future generations—to protect it.

I think it's valuable and youthful to do, but I don't think it's going to change the majority of people's minds. If you think of it just in that way it'll always be a niche and not really a movement. If you really want people to embrace the idea of environmentalism and embrace the idea of saving nature, then it really has to relate to how it will also help save themselves.

For me, understanding our own nature and seeing ourselves as part of nature means that the reasons for saving nature then become in our enlightened self-interest.

ZACH DORFMAN: Do you think that risks an overly anthropocentric perspective?

M. SANJAYAN: Sure, of course it does. But think about how little progress we've really made on most things that are imperiling the planet.

If I thought that love alone was enough to actually save it all, I'm happy, because that's what motivates me. But you and I, and frankly probably a lot of people who listen to this, are in a tiny minority both in this country, but also in the planet. So if you want to speak with the majority voice it has to have some meaning to people whose lives are really impacted by nature.

ZACH DORFMAN: Does that mean focusing more on environmental concerns, especially vis-à-vis urban areas?

M. SANJAYAN: It can mean that. Really what I'm getting at is not just focusing on urban environments—which is very necessary and important—but really focusing on asking ourselves: Where do all the things we need for a healthy, productive, and happy life, really come from? If you actually start pulling it apart you realize that all of it can be traced back to nature.

The clothes I'm wearing, they're cotton. That cotton was grown—and I'm going to guess—probably in Georgia. It was grown using water from the Flint River. That's a real river, and that river flows actually underneath the Atlanta airport. You land on one of those runways, you're literally flying over that river. That river also has a lot of threatened and endangered species.

Here's a shirt that I'm wearing and that shirt is grown from a real place in a real valley, with real people working on it, but also real biological life that depends on it.

ZACH DORFMAN: It seems to me that this is a perspective that you developed over time and traveling to many, many different places. I want to talk a little bit about that because I watched an episode of your National Geographic series, *EARTH: A New Wild*, last night. It was the water episode, which was fantastic, and I highly recommend anybody who is listening to this to check out this series.

In this series you travel to more than two dozen countries to look at the ways that humans and nature interact. What surprised you most during your travels?

M. SANJAYAN: Two things. The first is that no matter how far I went the hand of man was always present and evident, whether it was the Arctic or Zimbabwe, whether it was Colorado or Uzbekistan. You could always track the human presence, from the deepest jungles, to the biggest plains on the planet. Humans have been on this planet for a long time, our impact is profound, and you can see that signal, very evident.

The second thing that amazed was that how even today in modern society—with 7 billion people on the planet—how we still need nature. When we ignore it, it comes back to bite us, sometimes with dramatic and graphic consequences. The loss of vultures in Asia leading to a massive increase in rabies; the loss of a particular kind of fish in Lake Malawi leading to the rise of bilharzia, which is schistosomiasis, a disease that's found in stagnant water, but also a rise in HIV rates. That kind of surprised me, the linkages and how apparent they were.

There was one other surprise and it was a positive surprise. I was also really amazed at how many people, people I would never meet, I would never see on TV, and never read about, were willing to take a stand and do something about it. I met heroes, mavens, and mavericks all through this journey. Most of them were not names that you would recognize. Yes, I hang out with [Jane Goodall](#) in East Africa, but I also hang out with other people that you really wouldn't hear about. I think that diversity of voices is what gave me most hope that we can do something about this.

ZACH DORFMAN: It seems if human beings have altered our natural environment so much and they've damaged the necessary things for us to live and thrive, that any kind of solution is going to require the mass buy-in of our species too. It's really interesting that you talked about what average people are doing, but I also want to also talk about some of the bigger, kind of elite-level shifts in ideas about climate change and environmental destruction.

Most notably, in the last month or so, was the announcement by [Pope Francis](#) in his [encyclical](#) on care for our common home. As you might have seen, after the pope's announcement, this was followed up almost immediately by a *New York Times* [op-ed](#) by the [Archbishop of Canterbury](#) and the [Archbishop of Constantinople](#). In this op-ed, they referred to action against climate change as a "moral responsibility" and "urgent requirement."

How do you think the involvement of influential religious figures, for instance, will affect the efforts to address global climate change and conservation? I say this particularly because I think that coming from the United States and the developed world where there's been this real secularization process, we kind of downplay the effect that religious leaders can have. I'm just curious what you think, what effect, if any, religious leaders can have on this process?

M. SANJAYAN: I think it's fantastic. I really do. I'll tell you a couple of things.

The first thing that was amazing about that encyclical was that it was [leaked](#) three days before it came out.

ZACH DORFMAN: I didn't know that!

M. SANJAYAN: Someone leaked it, which tells you that they were holding it with some level of importance. If no one leaked this thing it would be like any other thing the pope did, it's like, "Ah, okay, whatever." This thing had enough importance that someone thought it was worthwhile leaking. That was my first signal.

It turns out, that when you look at things like climate change and when you look at big shifts, the number one predictor, or number one influence of what shifts people's attitudes—what you eat, or an action you take, or who you vote for—tends to be people like yourself; in other words, community, or society, or culture. They trump everything else. They trump logic, they trump science, and they sometimes even trump money.

People will do things not in their self-interest if they feel community pressure to do that. This is shown over and over and over again. You tend to listen to people who are your family, your friends, your neighbors, your teachers, and the people you worship with.

When the pope and archbishops take this moral stand, it's very powerful because they are really the spiritual guides for one-fifth or one-sixth of the planet, something like that. I think it does help unify. It helps to have a quantization now between Catholics, some who might agree with climate change and some who might not want to agree with climate change. It allows them to have that conversation.

ZACH DORFMAN: Keeping with the topic of climate change. In the latest issues of our journal, we ran

a review of a recent book [*Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed—and What It means for Our Future*] about the struggle against climate change, by the environmental philosopher Dale Jamieson. And Jamieson suggests that we "abandon the Promethean dream of a certain decisive solution and instead engage with the messy world of temporary victories, and local solutions."

What are your thoughts on tackling climate change? Should we focus on incremental improvements, or do we need a grand global solution? Or is this a false choice in itself because you have to do both at the same time?

M. SANJAYAN: I think it partly is a false choice because you don't know what those grand solutions are. You are not moving back to the future.

ZACH DORFMAN: Yeah, of course.

M. SANJAYAN: *Back to the Future Part III*, I think, was filmed in October of 1990. [*Editor's note: This film was released on May 25, 1990.*] The 25th anniversary is coming up. You look at that movie and it's amazing all the things they got wrong about what the future would actually look like.

ZACH DORFMAN: Flying skateboards . . .

M. SANJAYAN: Flying skateboards, for example.

You think about *Blade Runner*. They could think about flying cars but they never imagined—the cars have to land. The guy had to get out to go to a video booth to do a video call, and he had to pay for it. [Laughs]

That movie—it was '82 when it came out. People weren't even imagining that you would be able to do video conferencing from a flying whatever, for free! [Laughs]

My point with that is that it's hard to know. Sometimes things happen very fast because something you didn't actually know is all of a sudden there. I agree you need to focus on the pragmatic, "what you can do now" solutions. But I don't agree that that is the only path. There are dam-breaks that happen in social movements, and within a decade.

The recent Supreme Court ruling is a great example of that. The time when Massachusetts agreed with gay marriage to the country agreeing with gay marriage: over 10 years.

ZACH DORFMAN: Staying on the topic of the Supreme Court, there was a major ruling today that went against the Obama administration in terms of regulating emissions, I believe.

M. SANJAYAN: Oh, I did not see that. Tell me.

ZACH DORFMAN: I believe—and I have to double check—but it was part of their retrofitting program. There was going to be new emissions requirements that the Obama administration under, I guess, the Clean Air Act, was trying to institute. There was a 5-4 decision that came down today that they ruled against it.

There were two or three conservative decisions that were handed down today, including one that is going to allow a lethal injection serum.

M. SANJAYAN: I did get that one.

ZACH DORFMAN: It's funny because: the Supreme Court giveth, the Supreme Court taketh away.

M. SANJAYAN: That's a fair point. I'm not suggesting that it's always going to the court and it's always going to work out in your direct favor. I am suggesting that sometimes you see cataclysmic jumps that happen that sometimes have nothing to do with the court. They create an environment where it becomes socially impossible not to take a stand on it. [Taking down the confederate flag](#) is a really good one, right?

ZACH DORFMAN: Yeah.

M. SANJAYAN: No court got involved in it, but when Wal-Mart, Warner Brothers, and when all these other businesses say: "You know, we're not really going to do this anymore." It's done.

ZACH DORFMAN: It's kind of this inexorable social pressure that builds. That's what I hope.

It seems to elude the United States at least, the topic of climate change, which still seems to be in the realm of contention in a way. I don't know, do you find that surprising?

M. SANJAYAN: I think it is still in the realm of contention partly because it is so politicized. I think that most politicians are smart, they actually understand the science, and they actually get it. They are making some kind of moral calculus that says either: "I'm going to get elected and I can do more good than harm if I get out of this topic." Or: "I'm going to get elected, and once I'm elected I'm already going to do something about this." I think most of these guys, and women, get it.

ZACH DORFMAN: With those difficulties in mind how would you rate, or gauge, the Obama administration's actions on climate change and environmental protection, more broadly?

M. SANJAYAN: It's tough to really understand the impact of any president in the time of office that they're in. History shows over and over again that in retrospect things either seem in a much more positive light or in a much more negative light.

I think that what he has done on China, in terms of emissions, was a pretty big breakthrough. It certainly got us out of a jam that we were in, which said, "China has to go first, before we actually do anything about it." I think in that respect it's going to be very good.

In other respects it's been challenging but I understand why the challenge is. At the end of the day governments rarely lead, they tend to typically follow. We haven't done a good enough job of convincing ordinary people across this country that this is an issue that they need to care about as much as they care about defense.

ZACH DORFMAN: There's the national level political components to climate change, but then of course climate change is kind of a paradigmatically international issue. I mean, emissions do not recognize borders.

We do have an incomplete and fragmentary, but very much existent, global governance structure to try to deal with these kinds of problems. One of these is the conference of parties. There's going to be a [major one](#) in Paris later this year, there's going to be a major UN climate summit. In past summits there have been breakthroughs, there have been disappointments, but what should we expect from this meeting?

M. SANJAYAN: It's a great question. The momentum is building on this meeting and I think you're going to see some really positive action, meaningful action. We certainly, at Conservation International, are treating this meeting with a degree of seriousness that we may not have shown in past meetings. Partly because this is the culmination of a lot of work that's already gone on and partly because China, United States, the pope, and others are now almost agreeing to be major players.

Bill Gates was just in France, just a few days ago, he met with President **Hollande** and he brought up the issue of climate change. Gates' own words were something like, "I care about development, but climate change is the flip side of that coin, they're both interrelated, and they're part of the same problem."

I obviously understand and know that Bill Gates, and his and **Melinda's** foundation, understand climate change and they rationally understand it and get it. That hasn't been the focus on their work but what he was implicitly saying was that if you want to do thoughtful development, if you want to alleviate poverty—which really is the focus of his work—you have to also think about climate change.

I'm seeing a lot of that kind of pressure, companies, key leaders, key industries, and key philanthropists all sort of saying the same thing. We, at CI, Conservation International, are making a special film that we've been asked to show within the Blue Zone. We're busy making it right now and it'll be a gut punch straight to the delegates, saying, "This is really what's at stake."

ZACH DORFMAN: I'm glad you brought up your own organization, Conservation International, because I wanted to talk about its role and the role of NGOs more broadly, in the global conservation movement.

What do you see as the core functions of organizations like CI, in terms of climate change, and just for CI, what are your top priorities for the next couple of years?

M. SANJAYAN: The core role an organization like Conservation International plays is to move faster than government, to be more open to competition, open to new ideas than business, and to do things that you may not have the entire population already on board with. If we're doing our work right, no non-profit, no NGO, can do it all. We, in some ways, have to be the spearpoint or have to be the catalyst or trusted partner. That's the role we want to play.

We want to be able to bring business, governments or policymakers, and communities together in order to solve problems that none of those sectors can do on their own. Businesses can move very fast if it's in their own best interest and they have the money to do it. Governments have scale and no one really else has—even the biggest businesses pale in comparison with modern-sized government. Communities have the heart and the passion to keep up with it year after year after year—that's where the rubber meets the road.

You really need to bring all three together but none of them on their own can solve big problems like climate change, fisheries in the Pacific Ocean, or loss of forest to clear-cutting for oil palm.

When I look at CI, our mission is pretty simple: Save nature, live better. You can reduce it to that. We work on that part of nature most of value to people and we try to save it. We try to do this by good policies and practices; we try to do it by thinking about sustained production, where you get your water from, where you get your coffee from, etc. We try to do it by protecting that part of natural capital, that part of nature that's of most value to the planet.

When I look forward I look at the big issues for us. I think oceans and distilleries, particularly in the Pacific, are a big deal. I think sustainable production of things like coffee—coffee has the chance of being the first commodity to be sustainable globally. It actually has the chance to do that. That's an incredible goal to aim for.

ZACH DORFMAN: It is.

M. SANJAYAN: We worked very diligently with Starbucks and Starbucks has achieved that goal. But Starbucks is just 4-5 percent of the coffee supply chain. We think we can get it there.

We work on sustained production of goods like coffee, like oil palm, and like tuna. We have a big focus on forests—forest conservation—and a big focus on water.

ZACH DORFMAN: My final question to you is: Are you optimistic about our shared environmental future? And, if so, what gives you that hope?

M. SANJAYAN: Most days. [Laughs] Most days I'm optimistic but there are some days when you just feel pretty bleak.

I think you do two things. One is you get out and you realize—there is a famous saying, it's like: "At least out-live the bastards." At least get out there to enjoy it because that's where for me, my sustenance and resonance come from.

The other is to realize that you're not alone. You're not working in this thing on your own. There are other people, there are amazing other people, who are working on this problem as well. We're finally getting to a point on the planet where 7 billion—while it's an enormous number—is actually starting to work, in some ways, on our side.

What I mean by that: People are actually talking about taking down the [Glen Canyon Dam](#). They're doing that because it'll improve how the rivers manage and how much water will be available in the river, probably 6 percent more because of loss of evaporation that happens currently right now in the lake that's created behind Glen Canyon Dam.

That kind of problem is only there because now we're down to that many people. In a world full of people, in a globalized world, sustainability becomes about availability. This notion of enlightened self-interest really becomes apparent. That's what gives me hope.

ZACH DORFMAN: I very much agree with you. I definitely think it's true that going out into the natural world is the thing that probably provides the most sustenance of all.

Well, I'm afraid we need to stop here. Once again we've been speaking with M. Sanjyan, executive vice president and senior scientist at Conservation International, and host of the National Geographic series, *EARTH: A New Wild*.

Thank you Sanjyan for joining us and all the best in the work ahead of you.

M. SANJAYAN: Thank you.

ZACH DORFMAN: This is Zach Dorfman for the Carnegie Council, and for the council's journal *Ethics & International Affairs*, from the Aspen Ideas Festival. Thank you for listening.

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