



AMERICA 
the best 

Social Solutions for Climate



CONFERENCE REPORT

DECEMBER 2010



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David Yarnold	President and CEO, National Audubon Society

America the Best

Conference Overview



DECEMBER 2010

Climate and other ecosystem scale problems are the biggest social challenges mankind has ever faced. Technical and policy solutions abound, but we lack public support and political will to solve them. That's why we convened **America the Best: Social Solutions on Climate**. The conference brought together 64 of America's leading social scientists and practitioners from the academic, NGO, foundation and corporate sectors who were willing to share their knowledge and collaborate on strategies to move forward on climate solutions.

This report overviews the outcomes of the conference. As you can tell from the pictures, it was a hard working day of discussion and evaluation. Participants came up with some exciting answers, coalesced in "A Guide for the Future" on page 15. It suggests that we need:

1. A new national public policy solution
2. New non-national or non-public policy solutions
3. A comprehensive strategic plan
4. A more effective movement
5. Authenticity
6. More and stronger coalitions
7. To reconnect with Americans
8. World-class communications

Conference generated information supporting and providing direction on each of those solutions is in the following pages. ecoAmerica will be using this information to provide some strategic direction and priorities for our future work, and invite you to consider doing the same.

We will continue to conduct research, convene leaders, and develop large-scale public engagement programs to engage Americans on climate and environmental solutions. We invite you to join us - to take up the challenge of working together for healthier, more secure, more prosperous nation for all Americans.

Amy Golden
Executive Director
ecoAmerica

Bob Perkowitz
Founder and Chairman
ecoAmerica



Executive Summary

America the Best: Social Solutions on Climate brought together 64 leaders to determine a path forward for climate solutions. In order to answer that question we had to figure what we've learned from the past: what worked and what didn't, and see if we could conceptualize a vision of a better America that would be meaningful to people. There were three working sessions:

Session I: [A New Vision for America](#)

Develop a practical, aspirational vision that can inspire and engage all Americans in a prosperous, sustainable future.

Session II: [What Have We Learned?](#)

What worked and didn't work over the past few years in achieving climate solutions.

Session III: [Where Do We Go from Here?](#)

Combine the vision and learning in go-forward goals and strategies.

Each session started with short framing talks by leading social thinkers from selected disciplines after which individual participants provided their insights in written responses. Then, in the first two sessions this information was synthesized in inter-disciplinary breakout groups that created eight sets of prioritized solutions. Finally, each group reported back to the conference.

Session III was designed to translate the content from the prior two sessions into specific go-forward strategies. After the framing talks there was a panel discussion, the individual participant responses, and a conference-wide open discussion.

The output of the America the Best conference has been synthesized by ecoAmerica into a summary report and supplement will be shared with the participants and selected other individuals and organizations.

This report also includes some specific recommendations in the Guide for the Future on page 15, developed by ecoAmerica from the conference outcomes.

Session I: A New Vision of the Future

This session focused on creating a practical, aspirational vision of America that would solve the climate crisis and perhaps other social problems. Conference participants envisioned a Renewed America driven by leadership and ingenuity toward a positive, value-focused, inclusive society embodying collaboration and compassion. This would incorporate:

- **Economic Realism**
- **A New Sense of Community**
- **"Next Generation Democracy"**
- **Reconnection with Ecology**

Session II: What Have We Learned?

Over the past few years, environmentalists have worked diligently to achieve truly meaningful solutions for the global climate crisis. Participants coalesced around four strategies that worked and two broad reasons why we were unsuccessful. **What worked:**

1. **Broadening the base** with new constituencies, especially youth/ academia, faith/evangelicals, corporate/business and vets.
2. **Making specific arguments** and benefits about prosperity/jobs, spirituality/values, health, weather, and local examples told in tangible ways.
3. **Engaging Leaders** in government, business, and media as allies and spokes-people created new advocates and credible messengers.
4. **Taking direct action** in engaging the states, stopping coal power plants, and promoting technological innovation.
5. **Greening efforts** for corporations, higher education, and buildings.

What didn't work?

1. **We did not put up a good fight.** We underestimated and let the other side set the agenda, played a weak defense and "let the lies fly."
2. **We failed to reach the hearts and minds of the American public.** We lacked a clear language, narrative and effective messengers; communicated policy versus values; didn't make climate relevant or important enough.

Session III: Where Do We Go From Here?

Session III was guided by a panel discussion and then an open-mike sharing of ideas. With a rough vision in hand from Session I, and some sense of what worked and didn't from Session II, in Session III participants determined eight areas of focus for go-forward strategies.

1. **Make sure we listen and learn** some lessons, not simply lurch to a new strategy or do the same old thing.
2. **Regroup:** Audit ourselves, perhaps consolidate, develop a common vision, partner with other organizations, and shift some funding strategies.
3. **Develop new strategies:** Inclusive, engaging, comprehensive and long term, united by a common vision.
4. **Build a broader base:** Broaden the base and build better working relationships with other sectors and segments.
5. **Be authentic:** Be more authentic, live and demonstrate our values.
6. **Communications leadership:** Take more risks and play hardball with deniers, but make it non-political, engaging and safe for Americans.
7. **Connect with values:** Go from the brain to the heart, and make values common ground and not a wedge.
8. **More effective tactics:** Pick off and implement achievable goals in legislation, business and other sectors, and empower people.

The conference closed with a discussion of next steps in the process of refining and implementing America the Best outcomes. ecoAmerica committed to continuing research and convening to help provide additional direction and support, and welcomed any and all partners in the process

Session I: America the Best

A New Vision of The Future



Session I: Background and Overview

The first session of **America the Best: Social Solutions on Climate** was a visioning session.

For most Americans, there is only one vision – our profit-driven, consumer-centric capitalism dominates to the point of exclusion of any other options. It promises economic growth, more and better jobs, and a better quality of life as measured by the size and quantity of possessions. The natural resources – minerals and fossil fuels – that we require for this ongoing economic growth seem unlimited in the aggregate, though our use of them is destroying our lands, oceans and atmosphere – and threatening habitats globally.

Environmentalism over the past century has been built on the consequences of resource depletion and pollution, and has been fairly successful dealing with past challenges. Americans have steadily preserved more of our natural heritage in wilderness areas, state and national forests and parks, and through private land conservation efforts. The federal government has also enacted significant statutes to limit pollution, which in turn have been effective in cleaning up much obvious pollution to the benefit of nature and our own health.

However, over the past couple of decades we have come to realize that we are polluting nature in broader yet more subtle ways that portend consequences on a global scale. While we were able to rally support among Americans for protection of our natural areas and halt much obvious pollution, we have been unable to address these bigger environmental challenges.

Some environmentalists question the ongoing viability of our present form of consumer/corporate-based capitalism. They offer sustainability or sustainable growth as an alternative – suggesting that by changing from carbon-based energy to renewables and more judicious use of natural resources through efficiency and recycling, we can avoid significant negative impacts of resource depletion and pollution, while enabling continued, profitable economic growth.

If the alternative to “capitalism” is “sustainability” or sustainable growth, what does that look like and how do we get there? Is there some other alternative to these two choices? To date we have had not had a compelling vision of the future that could change motivators and behaviors at the scale and speed necessary to address our current climate challenges.

Is there some alternative to our burn and trash, grow-most-at-lowest-cost capitalistic model or our unfocused but seemingly self-sacrificial sustainability? **America the Best**, Session I, seeks to answer this question.

Session I: Outcomes

Following an introduction by ecoAmerica Executive Director Amy Golden, the session began with presentations by four speakers (summaries in supplemental report) charged with providing inspiration, context and information to facilitate discussions on A New Vision for America.

John Passacantando spoke about the need for new ideas and an aggressive, non-partisan approach to climate solutions. Jared Duval and Carolyn Lukensmeyer offered complementary takes on the need for a new, informed, participative democracy, along with some specific suggestions on how to achieve it. Andrew Winston spoke about the leading role business needs to take to succeed in and support a sustainable future.

The group then split into eight teams that worked in a collaborative, structured process to determine their top three “New Visions for America.” Individuals in each group wrote down their ideas and presented them to their respective groups. The group then engaged in a discussion to consolidate and prioritize those ideas. Finally, each of the eight teams reported back to the assembly. Consolidating the results from the table team discussions yields a broad new vision for America, along with three supporting concepts.

A Renewed America: Participants united around a vision of a healthy, safe, beautiful, abundant America where people matter – more just, environmentally and economically sustainable. We unleash American ingenuity to lead the world (again) towards a positive, value-focused, inclusive future. Personified in “The New American Pioneeress” and the Statue of Liberty, embodying collaboration, compassion and coordination. This vision is grounded in:

Economic Realism: Economic growth is driven by “better” not “more” and a new definition of abundance versus scarcity in a prosperous, people-driven, clean American energy economy. A triple bottom line focus moves us from consumption to innovation, supported by sustainable new accounting principles.

A New Sense of Community: We’re in this together. We build healthy, vibrant, inclusive and resilient communities grounded in public discussion, responsibility, well-informed planning and inspiration. “We the people” own the process and are empowered and inter-connected in our communities.

Next Generation Democracy: We have a democratically enriched America – in the truest sense a return to America’s original democratic principles – empowered by today’s technology. An effective, responsible, vigorous, collaborative, innovative, polity, with public information based on “the Fairness Doctrine.”

A Reconnection with Ecology: “This land is your land, this land is my land.” In our psychology, economy and sociology, we are inspired to reconnect with nature and “America the Beautiful.” This ranges from public ownership of the environment where polluters pay, and we ourselves (conservationists) live our values in authentic way, as low carbon leaders who recognize nature as a partner.



Session II: Background and Introduction

Over the past five years, American environmentalists have spent more than a billion dollars and thousands of person-years of effort trying to establish domestic and international agreements that would slow, stop and reverse the climate crisis. Most of this effort has been focused on a single policy solution - a market-based “Cap-and-Trade” approach that monetizes greenhouse gas pollution and enables organizations and nations to buy and sell pollution credits.

It didn't work. Not only do we not have any policy on climate crisis, solutions have been pushed years into the future, perhaps when we are well past levels of a predicted positive-feedback, 'point-of-no-return,' climate catastrophe.

We need to regroup, recommit and refocus on achieving effective, new climate solutions as quickly as possible. We need to get it right this time. One way of improving our prospects in our next attempt is to learn what worked and what didn't work from our past efforts.

Media and the environmental community have generated numerous “post mortem” analyses about why we didn't succeed. Standard excuses place the blame on externalities. We have been out-thought and out-spent by immoral carbon interests. We were unable to raise adequate competitive resources. Competing issues distracted America. Our political leaders didn't lead.

These explanations neither accept responsibility for failure nor provide any guidance for our next attempt to achieve public policy or other transformative solutions for climate crisis. To learn what worked and didn't work we need to go deeper than the externalities and policy discussions. Public policy doesn't exist in a vacuum.

So, the second session of the America the Best: Social Solutions on Climate conference focused on learning. By expanding the audience beyond full-time environmentalists and their dependent service providers, and facilitating open-ended, candid discussion on what happened over the past five years, we sought to generate a set of useful principles for whatever comes next.

Session II: Outcomes

If we could turn back the clock five years or so, and take another run at passing effective climate solutions legislation in America, or garnering support for a clean energy economy, what would we do differently? Session II was designed to put some perspective on what worked, and what didn't so we can determine a more effective path forward. Meighen Speiser, ecoAmerica's Vice-president of Marketing, opened the session with her own perspective, and then introduced the speakers for Session II: What Have We Learned?

All four opening speakers, Roberta Bowman, Lee Wasserman, Michel Gelobter and Celinda Lake emphasized our lack of connection with mainstream Americans (summaries in supplemental report). Our positions and our communications did not resonate, so even people who typically support environmental values did not engage in personal behavior or public policy climate solutions. In some cases, as Michel Gelobter pointed out, we did not make a strong enough argument, perhaps because we didn't believe it ourselves.

So, what worked? The eight table discussions coalesced around five effective strategies, all of which emphasized connecting with Americans:

1. **Broadening the base** by engaging new constituencies, especially youth/academia, faith/evangelicals, corporate/business and vets.
2. **Making specific, often local arguments** on prosperity/jobs/innovation, saving money, spirituality/values, health, national security, weather, and local examples told in tangible, engaging ways.
3. **Engaging Leaders** in government, business and media as allies and spokespeople created new advocates and helped build credible messengers beyond the environmental community.
4. **Collaborating and taking direct action** locally and specifically, primarily in engaging the states, stopping coal power plants, promoting technological innovation.
5. **Greening efforts** for corporations, higher education, and buildings.

What didn't work? The ranked output from the eight group discussions focused on two reasons why the battle for climate solutions was lost.

1. **We did not put up a good fight.** We let the other side set the agenda (economy/ jobs), underestimated the opposition, and didn't anticipate and plan well for the battle. We played a weak defense while they constantly attacked us, and “let the lies fly.”
2. **We were uniquely ineffective in our engagement of the American public to build support for climate solutions,** while our opponents were highly effective. We lacked a clear language, narrative and effective messengers; communicated policy versus values; didn't make climate relevant or important enough; and we failed to reach both the minds and the hearts of Americans on the issue.

How could we be so ineffective? The working groups emphasized that the environmental movement is out of touch with America and that the focus on a single “bloated” government program or “big fix” did little to engage Americans or show them why solutions mattered to them personally. We conducted a “policy campaign” when it should have been a “cultural campaign.”

Not surprisingly, the hundreds of individual comments provided by ATB participants (summarized in supplemental report) yielded some priorities and provided substantive specifics and some additional insights on what worked and what didn't. The dominant theme among individual ATB participants was lack of authenticity and our poor public engagement and communications.

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Session III: Where Do We Go From Here?



Session III: Overview

Session I yielded a vision of a renewed America driven by leadership and ingenuity toward a positive, values-focused, inclusive society embodying collaboration and compassion. This vision incorporated a new sense economic realism and of community, “next generation democracy,” and a reconnection with ecology.

Session II gathered successful strategies including a) broadening the base with new constituencies; b) making tangible arguments on social benefits of climate solutions; c) engaging new leaders; d) taking direct action in the states, on coal, and in promoting technological innovation; and e) with greening efforts for corporations, higher education, and buildings. Overall, however, we were unsuccessful because we underestimated the opposition, we didn’t anticipate and plan well for the battle, and didn’t engage well enough either the hearts or minds of Americans for our cause.

With a vision and some sense of what worked and didn’t, Session III asked, “Where do we go from here?” After an introduction by Bob Perkowitz, the session started out with brief talks by David Yarnold, Seth Robbins, Betsy Taylor and Whitney Mortimer. Their comments were perhaps best summarized by David Yarnold saying, “We’ve been aiming at people’s heads rather than their hearts. We need to be the example and model the behavior we want others to share.” (speaker summaries in supplemental report)

These presentations were followed by a panel discussion that addressed two issues: how can the movement work better together, and how can it work better with others. Then, conference participants shared their ideas with the whole

So, where do we go from here? To get to that answer we synthesized the 138 suggestions from the individual participants into the eight specific strategies listed below. The titles are by ecoAmerica, the number in the parenthesis is the number of participant comments, and the specific ideas that follow are in the words of the America the Best participants.

Session III: Outcomes

Where Do We Go From Here? Strategies:

- 1. Get in touch with America and ourselves (8):** Make sure we learn some lessons, not simply lurch to a new strategy or do the same old thing. This is a time for real blue-sky thinking, not group think. Leave DC. Get out in to the real country. Anything you have thought of already – DON’T do that. Find ways to truly understand and to talk to the other side, do a power map, listen to the opposition, have difficult conversations. Don’t do anything you had planned to do, listen and don’t move until you hear calling, Engage in a journey of listening, dialoging, and expression. Have a national dialogue on what American happiness means.

- 2. Regroup (14):** Audit the climate movement – who does what? What are the results? Unify efforts. Too many groups all doing the same thing – can we be more strategic? Create fewer, bigger (and as a result, more powerful and unified) green organizations. Come together as a community to create a common vision/purpose so we can grow to include many others.

Environmental groups need to form a consortium with government and business, to plan and coordinate actions, goals. Public-private consortium for financing the new economy. Stop thinking as organizations and start thinking as a movement. Do politics, build power. Build the power of our movement. Hold funders and foundations accountable. Funders shift from project funding to sustained funding including operations.

- 3. Develop new strategies (9):** Make no little plans, they have no magic to stir men’s souls. Plan for resilience, develop socio-economic scenarios and pair them with communication plans. Need a comprehensive national (and local and international) strategy to engage Americans. Create a long-term narrative, plan. An inclusive strategy with actions united by a common, simple values/vision. Develop an integrated, comprehensive strategy inside/out and outside/in, top down and bottom up. Develop plausible socioeconomic scenarios, develop communications plans, define scope in entirety, and inspire and motivate. Articulate a clear vision. We need science and opposition strategy, economic/communications, and policy, short-term, long-term.
- 4. Build a broader base (18):** Broaden base and demographic of environmental movement. Build more relationships outside of your own tribe. Stop thinking of “them” (minorities, religions, etc.). Form more coalitions outside of enviros. Build a more diverse movement, full strategy to bring more of the middle over to understanding story of global warming. Be more inclusive and diverse. Work with public health, civil defense organizations, health organizations, because they are trusted. Religious organizations encompass most people in the world. Appeal to the emotions of Republican grassroots – make them proud of the GOP conservation heritage. Invest in raising more of the business voices (small business owners). Youth and women, emotional message that will appeal personally to Americans, tap into American pride. Engage moms and youth as leaders – family/personal/health/prosperity. Invest in 350, invest in youth, Mobilize students of all ages, create passionate protect my future campaign, My America Dream. We need to invest in youth activism and support of these organizations. Most of these issues and splits can be explained generationally. The under 30 group is place to go for bold action. Develop grassroots movement, bypass media – connect dots.
- 5. Be authentic (5):** Create a pledge/set of actions we could commit to ourselves and then make actionable. Gandhi said, “be the change” and if you’re not into him... Michael Jackson said, “start with the guy in the mirror”. Few of the leaders live the green life or anything close. How can we get to political will if we can’t even get this stuff done ourselves? Be more authentic. Build a new movement, authentic long-term vision, values-based.
- 6. Communications leadership (19):** Take more risks in communications area. More risk taking in communications. Lead the narrative, do offense. Play hardball – street fight. Centralized strategy and messaging center. Hold bad actors more accountable more of the time. Find better surrogates, be relentless, be fearless. Disconnect from politics – social issue. Avoid further polarization, longer term approach. Make it safe and not radical. Stop responding to re-tread arguments from 1980’s, generational consciousness shift isn’t going fast enough. Stop talking about climate change, talk about clean air; clean water; carbon pollution, and energy security. The American People’s Manifesto for a Healthy Planet. Simplify the message and manifesto for a handful of a few key (understandable) points. It’s not what we’re “selling”, it’s what they’re “buying”. Go out and ask the non-engaged what they’d “buy”. Reframe the basics: security, health, food, water; spirituality/happiness with nature’s bounty as the foundation. Inspire people by what’s happening/possible in moving toward a clean energy future. Tell stories! Stop talking about policy. Educating the public about these problems needs to be extensive and continuous and build on itself.
- 7. Connect with values (6):** Make values common ground and not a wedge. Ask what they care about in general – what moves them, what scares them? Go one foot down from brain to heart – to emotion, to compassion,

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Session III: Where Do We Go From Here?



to community. Create larger narrative on prosperity. A new coalition for Americans' love of land/family/place – America's values. Need sub-stories by audience: Business/competitiveness, growth markets, survival, innovation, moms – safe present and future for kids, Religious – care for others, moral, Finance – lower risk, higher returns.

8. **More effective tactics (12)** Maybe legislation is not the only important barometer of success, Get done what we can get done! Pick off achievable legislation, regulation, etc., and go for it to build the positive pieces of change. Build on incremental success to grow and maintain base of power and political momentum. Be willing to give up on winning policy reforms in the short-term if needed in order to put the time, effort, and money into organizing. Then build up from there – winning local then state, then whatever else. Get the actual reductions going, support real brick and mortar projects, support organizations who do them and who support clean economy business people, regional approaches and collaborative organizational development to create the clean economy and push for local, state, and policy changes, partner with big companies who connect with people every day. Empower carbon-eliminating businesses to put fossils out of business.

Help communities prepare for dual economic and climate impacts. Learn from the conservative moment to invest in the creation, production and dissemination of progressive ideas. Create think tanks that produce ideas, not policy proposals. Do whatever it takes to put tangible solutions into people's hands, from concentrated laundry detergent to local/state tax incentives for alternative energy – and we couple it with an explanatory message about why it benefits the consumer and workforce. Defend climate science. Talk about climate change 800-1000 ppm.

A Guide for the Future

If we truly believe the facts about the consequences of the climate crisis, environmentalists need to regroup quickly and make another run and implementing solutions on a scale and time-frame that will meaningfully address the issue. A consolidated perspective on the speaker, working session and individual comments from the America the Best conference yields some clear recommendations. **We need:**

1. **A new national public policy solution** – a solution that can both generate adequate public support and solve the problem. This needs to incorporate the best aspects of America's populist orientation toward low cost, small government, no new taxes, positive incentives and transparency. This might be "Cap & Cash Back" or a shift in taxes from middle class Americans to polluters. It should be a huge tax break for most Americans.
2. **New non-national or non-public policy solution** that would be support of and possibly an alternative to national public policy. It would include a number of federal, state and sector strategies that collectively would enable the United States to reach the Copenhagen Accord targets even without federal climate legislation.
3. **A comprehensive plan** – a strategic roadmap with achievable goals, specific tactics, realistic timetables, adequate support and contingency plans that the movement will support in a fairly unified way. It must be developed, periodically reviewed, and adjusted in a focused, inclusive, transparent process.
4. **A more effective movement** on both the funder and the NGO sides. We need to be more strategic vs. project oriented; be more inclusive; better plan and coordinate at both the strategic and tactical levels; and better develop and share information among ourselves.
5. **Authenticity:** We need to better live our values if we want others to share them. We should develop and make organizational and individual commitments to principles and actions that will bring purpose, authenticity, unity and transparency to our goals and work.
6. **More and stronger coalitions:** We need to renew and expand our efforts to reach out to and engage institutional leaders in other sectors and movements including faith, business, agriculture, industries, minorities, labor, academia and government at all levels.
7. **To reconnect with Americans:** We need to shift our focus from complex, distant, abstract issues toward people and values while assiduously avoiding partisan politics. Only by connecting with people will we build the public support necessary for good public policy.
8. **World-class communications.** We need to be a few steps ahead and use state-of-the-art techniques in expressing climate change solutions and their benefits so that Americans can rally around them. We also need to better refute those who misinform Americans about the climate change and solutions.

This summary list is meant as a guide to continuing discussion and planning for a successful next round of effort at achieving lasting climate solutions. ecoAmerica will continue or research and convening efforts, and welcomes your thoughts, participation and support.

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Social Solutions for Climate

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ecoAmerica is a non-profit that uses consumer research and strategic partnerships to create large-scale engagement programs that build awareness, understanding and action for climate and environmental solutions among mainstream Americans.



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