

Engaging with the community: Al Gore's Climate Change Leadership Program

Sam Moors is Executive Director of the Nelson Meers Foundation, a PPF which she co-founded with her father, Nelson Meers, in 2001. A former lawyer, Sam is also a Council Member and Vice President of Philanthropy Australia, a Board Member of the Documentary Australia Foundation and a Council Member of the Power Institute.

In September last year, I had the privilege of participating in Al Gore's Climate Change Leadership Program (conducted in partnership with the Australian Conservation Foundation) when he was in Australia shortly before winning the Nobel Peace Prize.



Through personal training by Al Gore, The Climate Project aims to promote dialogue about the climate crisis and its solutions, working on the premise that one of the most effective ways to achieve political change is to start with community values.

Participation in The Climate Project was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Along with 100 other individuals with diverse backgrounds from all over Australia, I spent three intensive and exhilarating days locked in a room with Al Gore, former CSIRO chief scientist Dr Graeme Pearman and a host of other eminent environmentalists, discussing climate change – heaven! However, the highlight of the program was the opportunity to engage with a wide range of passionate and inspiring fellow-trainees, who have reinvigorated my faith in human nature and in our capacity to achieve change.

Climate change is a complicated matrix. It encompasses a myriad of issues which are amongst the defining challenges of the 21st century – global warming; the degradation of natural resources such as water, aquatic ecosystems and land; the loss of biological diversity; and the corresponding negative impact upon our global productive capacity which will in

turn entrench and exacerbate poverty and famine. We are embarking upon this century with a greater – and at times terrifying – understanding of the way in which human activities affect global systems in complex, interactive and accelerating ways.

Martin Luther King once said that there is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect: "Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words, 'Too late'." The challenge which is upon us now is to act decisively, as individuals and as a global community, to commit to a new vision for the future which will permit us to reconcile our relationship with the planet and to create a world in which environmental and economic sustainability can co-exist.

We need courage and leadership at this critical juncture. The recent ratification of the Kyoto Protocol by the current Australian Government is an important (and long overdue) symbolic step, but we must ensure that we do not lapse into apathy, winning the battle but losing the war. Whilst we must continue to urge government to privilege a sustainable future in its policies, such a future cannot be achieved without a new community vision and integrated international action. Unfortunately, the complex scientific debate that has raged around global warming has alienated many groups within the community, leaving them with a sense of disbelief ("it's not really happening") or futility ("it's happening, but there's nothing we can do to stop it"), translating into inaction. The 'climate wars' have also engendered a sense of mistrust within the community, due largely to the perception that both sides of the debate are motivated by vested interests.

It is vital that we translate the desire to do something about climate change into positive and targeted action. The United Nations Development Programme echoed this sentiment in its most recent Human Development Report 2007-2008: "The world has less than a decade to change course. Actions taken – or not taken – in the years ahead will have a profound bearing on the future course of human development. The world lacks neither the financial resources nor the technological capabilities to act. What is missing is a sense of urgency, human solidarity and collective interest".

The philanthropic sector can play an important role in mobilising its resources to identify, encourage and accelerate innovative approaches to environmental problems which will contribute to the shift in perspective that is required in order to achieve long term change. With its freedom from political pressures and corresponding ability to respond to emerging social and community concerns ahead of government or business and thereby generate social change, philanthropy is perfectly placed to lead the climate change charge. The philanthropic sector must work with business and government to focus on projects which enable a critical, broad-ranging and unbiased discussion of the issues surrounding climate change, the potential solutions and – most importantly – what we can do to ensure that the most appropriate measures are implemented.

There seem to me to be three priority areas to which philanthropic funding would be well directed:

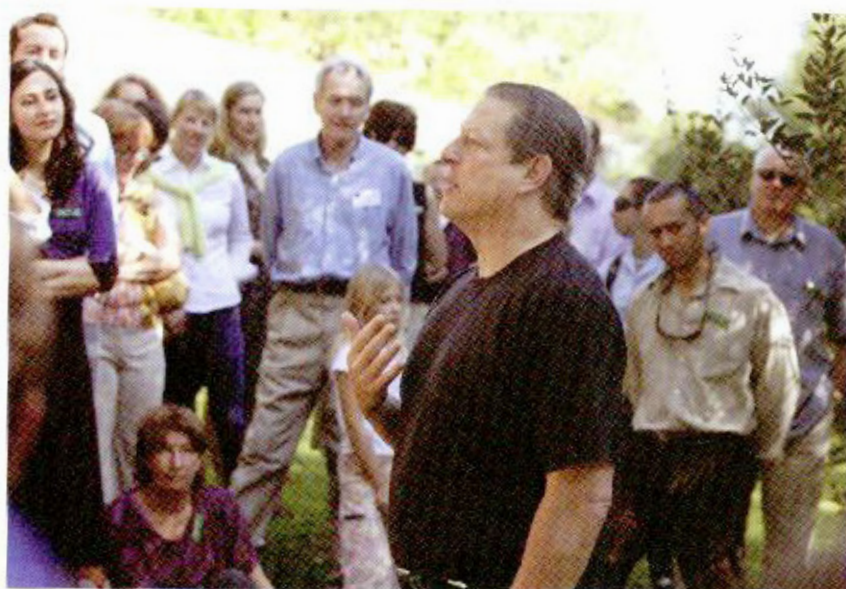
- raising community awareness of the practical ways in which potential solutions can be implemented in order to close the gap between intent and action";

- the development of renewable energies, sustainable technologies and land management techniques which can be implemented domestically and exported and adapted to developing countries; and
- promoting greater understanding of the 'development impact' of climate change – that is, the interconnectedness of environmental and human welfare problems, both domestically and globally, and the potential negative impact on poverty reduction, nutrition, health and education.

In order to raise greater awareness of the way in which environmental issues affect us all, both as individuals and as a community, and to encourage a focus on action, the Nelson Meers Foundation recently funded an exhibition at the State Library of New South Wales, entitled *Impact: A Changing Land*, which draws upon the Library's significant collection of historical material to demonstrate the impact – both positive and negative – which we have had on our Australian environment. The exhibition was opened by Professor Tim Flannery in November last year and concludes later this month.

One of the exhibition's highlights is its focus on the many heroes in Australia's history who have risen to environmental challenges. For example, the 13 Hunters Hill women – the legendary 'Battlers for Kelly's Bush' – who joined forces with Jack Munday's Builders Labourers Federation to become our first urban environmentalists. This courageous group campaigned for over a decade to save the last remaining bushland on the Parramatta River in Hunters Hill in New South Wales from development, with the BLF implementing the world's first Green Ban. The Green Ban concept was subsequently used throughout the world – and, more locally, to prevent the Sydney Botanic Gardens being turned into a carpark for the Opera House, Centennial Park being turned into a sports arena, and the historic buildings in the Rocks being converted to office blocks. This is a great example of the power of the individual – and the fundamental need to translate passion into action in order to achieve change.

One of Al Gore's most important and persuasive messages is that environmental problems and human welfare problems are interconnected. He argues that whilst we face indisputable danger from global warming, we should not move from denial to despair. The climate crisis in fact offers us hope – the chance to participate in



Al Gore at The Climate Project training session in Sydney, September 2007.

"a generational mission; the exhilaration of a compelling moral purpose, a shared and unifying cause".² The lessons we will learn from rising to the challenge of climate change will give us the capacity, vision and courage to take on other global challenges – such as poverty and famine.

By embracing a culture of genuine globalisation, recognising that we share a common fate with humanity, we can equip ourselves to rise to this challenge. As Al Gore says, this is our moral moment.

Throughout the ages, there are countless examples of human beings drawing on tremendous courage in the face of great adversity to effect fundamental social change. Two hundred years ago, the opponents of slavery were derided because no economy could function without slave labour; one hundred years ago, the suffragettes were persecuted when they demanded the vote for women; only 40 years ago, Indigenous people were not regarded as Australian citizens; and as recently as 20 years ago, Berlin was divided by the Wall and South Africa lived under the specter of apartheid³. These reforms occurred because determined people worked for a better world.

The environment inspires individual action because it affects each and every one of us, both materially and spiritually. In 1990, the spacecraft Voyager 1 took a photograph which showed the Earth as a 'pale blue dot' against the vastness of space. Discussing the photograph, the late Carl Sagan, the American astronomer and environmental scientist, offered a beautiful description of our relationship

with planet Earth, which is pinned on the wall of my office and inspires me daily. It bears transcription:

"On that pale blue dot is everyone you know, everyone you love, everyone you've ever heard of. Every human being who ever was, lived out their lives on it. The aggregate of all our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines... On a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam... our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity – in all this vastness – there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. It is up to us to deal more kindly and compassionately with one another and to preserve and cherish this pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known."⁴

We are trustees of this planet for future generations. Our imagination, our ingenuity and our passion are our most important tools. As members of the philanthropic sector, we have a moral obligation to utilise our every resource to work together to choose a future for our children and bring about this cultural and generational change.

1. *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*, speech delivered by Martin Luther King, 4 April 1967.
2. I am grateful to Ian Buchanan for his comments in this regard.
3. Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006)
4. Professor Ian Lowe AO highlighted these historical milestones in the paper he delivered at the Spirituality and Sustainability Forum, 6 June, 2007.
5. Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (1994)