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INTERVIEW

Bill McKibben says cheap solar could topple Big Oil's power

The veteran activist says that solar has finally scaled to the size of the climate crisis – and he's organizing a nationwide "Sun Day" this weekend to promote clean energy.



by MICHAEL SVOBODA
SEPTEMBER 18, 2025



(Image credit: CHUTTERSNAAP / Unsplash)

Bill McKibben is like that old culture of yeast you revive when you want to start a new batch of sourdough. He makes movements rise.

McKibben is a cofounder and senior adviser of climate activist group [350.org](#), the founder of [Third Act](#) – a climate and democracy group led by U.S. residents over the age of 60 – and the principal instigator behind [Sun Day](#), a nationwide community celebration of solar energy on September 21.

View: [Sun Day events](#)

His power as an activist stems from his craft as a writer. McKibben still contributes pieces to [The New Yorker](#), the iconic magazine that serialized Rachel Carson's "[Silent Spring](#)" in 1962 and then launched his own career by serializing "The End of Nature" in

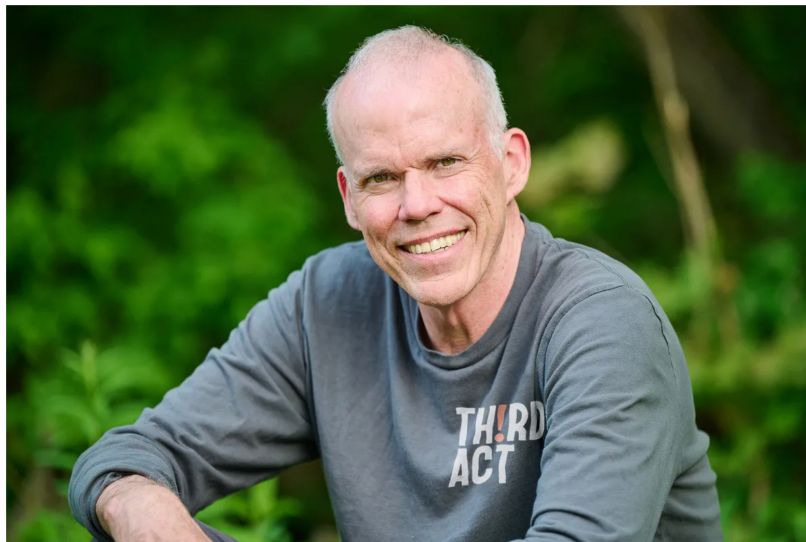
1989. That book, his first, can fairly be described as the first work of popular nonfiction about climate change. Since then, McKibben has published more than 20 books, including his 2007 manifesto for a just and sustainable economic system, “[Deep Economy](#),” and his 2022 look back at his “suburban boyhood,” when he sang in the church choir and led American Revolution tours of his historic New England town, “[The Flag, the Cross, and the Station Wagon](#).” Since 2022, McKibben has also written for his Substack site, “[The Crucial Years](#).”

McKibben’s new book, “[Here Comes the Sun](#),” is a sober yet upbeat look at “a last chance for the climate and a fresh chance for civilization.” In the book, McKibben argues that now that solar is the most affordable form of energy anywhere on the planet, we have an unprecedented opportunity to scale up climate action to the level required for planetary effect. It is an opportunity, a moment, that we all must seize together, starting this Sun Day.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Yale Climate Connections: I think it would be fair to describe many of your previous books as environmental Lamentations or Jeremiads. But in this book, you seem to be in New Testament mode, spreading good news. What has happened with renewable energy that is so remarkable?

Bill McKibben: Well, I have to caution listeners at the beginning: I remain a bit of a [Jeremiah](#). The climate crisis that I started writing about in the 1980s is coming to precisely the fruition that scientists said it would. And we’re seeing extremely dangerous things happening now with the most fundamental systems on the Earth. And we’re seeing all this, of course, at a moment in our own country when there’s a sense that democracy is winking out.



(Image credit: file photo courtesy of Third Act)

In the midst of those very big bad things, however, there is one big good thing happening on this planet. And that is the sudden surge in the use of what, for the last 40 years, we’ve called alternative energy, but which has now become the most obvious, straightforward way to make power.

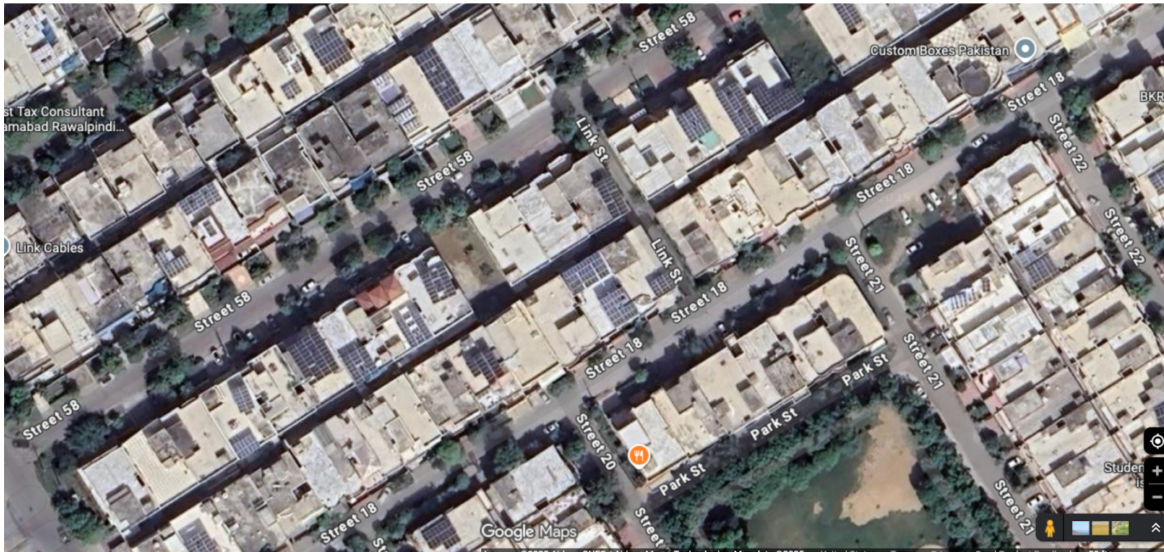
Ninety-five percent of new generation here and around the world last year came from clean energy. And the acceleration continues. In May, the latest month for which we have numbers, China was installing three gigawatts of solar power per day. That means they were putting up the solar equivalent of a coal-fired power plant every eight hours. Those numbers are so different from anything we’ve seen before that it seemed worth writing this book to spread that story.

YCC: And it's not just China. In your book, you describe what has been happening in Pakistan.

McKibben: Yes. I've watched what has happened over the last year when a flood of very cheap Chinese solar panels enabled Pakistanis to essentially remake their country's electric grid. They built the equivalent of half the country's electric grid in eight months just using TikTok videos to put together solar panels.

If you go look at Google Earth, they're on the roof of every apartment house and factory and mini mall in Lahore and Karachi and Islamabad. In 40 years of working on climate issues, solar is the one thing I've seen that's shown any possibility of scaling to the place where it actually interrupts the flow of carbon into the atmosphere.

I think we should push all our chips in as hard as we can on this bet.



Solar panels on roofs in Islamabad, Pakistan. (Imagery © 2025 CNES / Airbus, Maxar Technologies via Google Maps. Used under these [guidelines](#))

YCC: In Pakistan, they're having to figure out how to remake their grid to accommodate what's happening there so fast. In the U.S., you point out, we need to rethink some of the ways we operate in order to accommodate abundant, cheap solar energy. What are some of the things that need to change here?

McKibben: Well, let's start with the most obvious thing that needs to change. We need a new president who's not a moron on issues around renewable energy. The fact that he shut down the large wind farm off the coast of Rhode Island just weeks before completion is a sign of the insanity that's overtaken our consideration of renewables.

But it's not the only sign. For rooftop solar, Americans pay three or four times as much as people in Australia or the EU. And the reason has only a small bit to do with tariffs and the cost of hardware. It's mostly what they call the soft costs, especially the expense and difficulty of getting licenses and permits.

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We have 15,000 municipalities in this country. Each one has its own building code, its own set of inspectors. It takes months to get approval. In the rest of the world, if you call

on Monday and say, “I want solar panels on my roof,” by Friday, they’re up there churning out power.

There’s some progress. National Renewable Energy Laboratory put out an app, called [Solar App Plus](#), that enables essentially instantaneous permitting. California, Maryland, and New Jersey have mandated this, which leaves 47 states left to go.

I’ll tell you another example of this. Across Europe, millions upon millions of people, apartment dwellers, have put up what’s called balcony solar, even simpler than a rooftop system. You just go to your local Best Buy in Stuttgart, plunk down a few hundred euros, and come home with a solar panel that’s designed to hang from the balcony of an apartment. Then you plug it into a wall with a standard cord, and it produces something like 20, 25% of the power that many apartments use. That’s illegal everywhere in the U.S. except in the state of Utah. There some [libertarian-minded state senator](#) said, “You know, why are the people of Provo and Salt Lake City denied this privilege enjoyed by the people of Germany?” And so now there are lots of YouTube videos of earnest Utahans putting up their new balcony solar and grinning at the process. I think that this is the kind of work we can get done in the next 18 months, even while we’re working to try and return a Congress that appreciates science and physics.

YCC: You also point out that as soon as renewable energy becomes affordable and thus successful, bogus humanitarian and environmental arguments arise against it. How should climate activists prepare to respond to claims that renewable energy ignores the poor, ignores birds and whales?

McKibben: The only way to respond is with the overwhelming flood of data that shows that they’re wrong.

Read: [Wind opponents spread myth about dead whales](#)

In fact, for people living in poverty on this planet, this is the greatest blessing that you can imagine. There was a big story in the [Times](#) about a new report from the European Think Tank Ember showing that [solar is taking off quickly across Africa](#), spreading the way it did in Pakistan last year, and for the same reasons. Hundreds of millions of people in Africa do not have electricity. Two hundred and fifty years of fossil fuel combustion have failed to provide them with even the rudiments of power. These people now understand that the only way they’re going to get affordable and reliable power is by taking advantage, not of distant supplies of oil or natural gas, but of local supplies of sun or of wind. And now that those solar panels usually come coupled with a battery, the power is more valuable than it was even a few years ago.

So I think the argument around poverty is pretty well settled. But I would like to add another layer to it. It’s the poorest people around the world, and in this country, who also suffer the most from the other effect of fossil fuel, not its destruction of the climate, but its destruction of the air around us.

YCC: How about the arguments that solar and wind pose threats to the environment?

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McKibben: Obviously, you don’t want to go to the most pristine wilderness area in the world, cut down its forest, and put up solar panels. But we do need to take some land, probably less than we use for fossil fuel now, in order to put up solar panels and wind turbines. The idea that we can’t do it because we’ll take land from agriculture is just nuts.

Take America. Our biggest crop in this country is corn. We grow 60 million acres of it. 30 million of those acres are converted into ethanol. That’s incredibly inefficient.

I was in a Illinois cornfield last summer doing some reporting for this book with a

I was in a Illinois cornfield last summer doing some reporting for this book with a farmer who was turning some of his land over to solar panels. And he said, “Look, here’s an acre of corn. I can raise enough ethanol on it to drive my Ford F-150 25,000 miles in a year. But if I take the same acre and cover it with a solar array, I’ll produce enough electricity to drive my Ford F-150 Lightning, the EV version of the same truck, not 25,000 miles but 700,000 miles.”

And now there’s something called agrovoltaics, raising crops on land with solar panels. Here in Vermont, where I live, we’re interplanting solar panels with native pollinator-attracting plants, trying to solve the biodiversity crisis at the same time as the climate crisis. There’s been such an enormous increase in these insects that farmers are reporting that fruit set on their orchards is up 30 and 40% because there’s all these wasps and flies and moths that are busily pollinating their apples and pears.

And then there are ways of integrating solar and wind into agriculture that produce agricultural benefits. You can find lots of pictures on YouTube of sheep happily grazing between solar arrays. Just don’t try this with goats, farmers say. They like to eat cable, and they enjoy jumping up on panels.



YCC: You argue that in this age of cheap and abundant renewable energy, especially solar, we have to rethink climate and environmental activism. What are the messages, actions that we need to reconsider?

McKibben: I think that climate activists have mostly done the right things over the years; it’s just that the environment in which we’re operating has changed. For the first 35 years of this fight, we operated in a world in which fossil fuels were cheap and renewable energy was expensive. And in that world, one of our jobs was to try and drive up the prices of fossil fuels.

That’s what carbon taxes were about. That’s why we had these massive divestment campaigns to raise their cost of capital. That’s why we fought their infrastructure expansion plans.

But now that’s flipped. Sometime in the last five years, we passed an invisible line where it became cheaper to produce energy from the sun and wind. We live on a planet where the easiest, cheapest way to make power is to point a sheet of glass at the sun.

And in this world, the goal of activism is to make things happen faster. Absent the climate crisis, it wouldn’t be so urgent. Thirty years from now, we’re going to run the planet on sun and wind because of economics. But if it takes 30 years, then the planet we run on sun and wind will be broken, because the climate crisis is happening in real time, very dangerously. Our job now is to speed this transition.

YCC: And for that reason, as I understand your book, you caution environmentalists against NIMBYism and lawsuits.

McKibben: I'll speak only to my own tribe of well-educated and affluent white people: "It's time to stop suing to block things you don't want to look at, to stop finding absurd excuses to back up your own aesthetic prejudices. It's time to embrace this possibility and to develop a new aesthetic." I've come to think that the wind turbine on the horizon is extremely beautiful, and I love the creative work that's happening on solar farms.

I think all these things point to a responsibility that we shirked in the past. Energy always came from somewhere else. We ripped the top off someone else's mountain to get the coal to make our lives easy. Now we can make energy where we are. Some of that can be done on our rooftops. Some of it needs to be done outside our communities. And that can be liberating in its own ways. One of the problems we have in this country and in this world is gross inequality. Fossil fuels barons like John D. Rockefeller figured out that when you control supplies of scarce and vital resources, you can become rich and powerful. [The ubiquity of solar energy can undermine that concentrated power –] if we just put our minds to it.



(Image credit: Jason Ng / Unsplash)

YCC: I particularly liked one of your side comments, that one of the responsibilities of climate activists under these new conditions is overcoming boredom. Please explain.

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McKibben: This comes from my experience. A couple of years ago, we started this thing called Third Act that organizes old people like me for action on climate and democracy. And one of the tasks we've taken on is watchdogging public utility commissions in states around the country. These are vitally important bureaucracies that have been captured by the utilities and the fossil fuel companies, and they've been protected by a force field of their own boringness. Who wants to sit all day in some anonymous state office building listening to testimony about utility rates? Basically, only the lobbyists for the utilities show up. But now we've trained up a whole cadre of older Americans who show up with a basket of knitting or a crossword puzzle book and are there witnessing, testifying, organizing, shedding sunlight on these proceedings. And it's a huge help.

We need a lot of nitty-gritty work like that, just as we need a lot of work to change the zeitgeist. We need to get people out of the place where they think of this as "alternative energy," as the Whole Foods of power: nice but pricey. Solar is the Costco of energy:

cheap, available in bulk, on the shelf, ready to go. I hope we all come to understand this. That's one of the reasons we're doing Sun Day.

YCC: Yes, let's talk about that. What is Sun Day?

McKibben: It's big day of climate action on September 21st, which happens to be a Sunday, but we're calling it "Sun Day," a sort of counterpart to Earth Day. And it'll have hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of actions all across the country. Many of them aimed at making it easier to get solar power up and running.

YCC: You note in your book that there was a previous Sun Day, Carter's Sun Day in 1978. That was a one-off. Do you envision this as a one-off, or is this something you'd like to see as an annual celebration?

McKibben: Part of me hopes that it won't be necessary to do it year after year, that quickly our leaders will figure out the logic of relying on cheaper, cleaner energy, because it doesn't seem like very hard logic to figure out. But as long as there's a need, we will keep pushing for sure.

This is our chance. Not to stop global warming, too late for that, but to stop it perhaps short of the place where it cuts civilization off at the knees. Every tenth of a degree Celsius that we can shave off the eventual temperature of the planet keeps another 100 million people in a comfortable climatic zone instead of moving them to a dangerous one. Tenth of a degree C, 100 million people; that seems something worth fighting for as hard as one can.

YCC: That was not the answer I expected. I think we continue to celebrate Earth Day as a reminder of our connections with nature. I can see Sun Day as an equivalent annual celebration.

McKibben: I love it. We've become very detached from the planet on which we live, mostly because we spend our lives staring at small rectangles of glass in our palms now. Anything that reminds us that we're planted in a living solar system is good, I think.

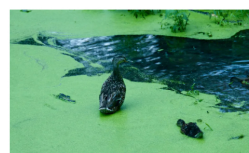
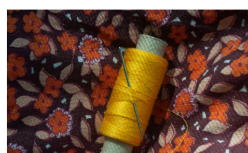
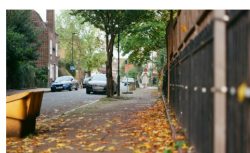
You know, I stole the title of this book from George Harrison. In the process, I was cheered to learn that "Here Comes the Sun" is, at least by the streaming data on Spotify, far and away the most popular of all the songs in the Beatles' vast catalog. Twice as many people are streaming it as "Hey Jude" or "Let It Be." I think its gentle and optimistic tone fits with people's deep desire for something different from the violent and ugly chaos that we're seeing in our country.

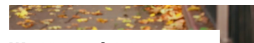
YCC: What counsel would you offer to young people who are living in these damaged planetary and political climates? How should they prepare for the day after Sun Day?

McKibben: Truthfully, I don't think young people need much counsel from me. I think most of them are doing the right thing and have this figured out. My counsel is mostly for people my age. We don't want to be the generation that leaves the world in a worse way than we found it and leaves our kids and grandkids in a state of despair.

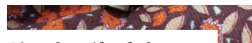
That's why we started Third Act. We've got about 100,000 people now across the country. I cannot tell you how much fun it is to be organizing with people my age to back up young people. And I cannot tell you how many old people have said to me, "Bill, my grandkids think I'm cool now."

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