

# Bill McKibben talks climate change at the Cary Institute

By Carola Lott

Over 150 people braved a thunderstorm to hear Bill McKibben speak at the Cary Institute on Thursday, April 28.

McKibben, who teaches at Middlebury College in Vermont, is the author of fifteen books about the environment including the best selling *The End of Nature*. He told the standing room audience that although we have known about global warming since James Hansen testified on climate change before a congressional committee in 1988, “we had no idea how hard and fast this was going to pinch. The planet is already different than the one we were born on, with 2010 being the warmest year for which we have records.”

Episodes of extreme heat accompanied by epic floods in Pakistan in June, record heat in Russia last summer, and this April, the catastrophic tornados in Alabama. These events followed the rise of a mere one degree Celsius; “there is another degree already in the pipeline.” Hansen has warned that unless we take immediate and drastic action to get off fossil fuel, we will see a further four or five degree increase before the end of the century.

While scientists have brought attention to the problem, they have been unable to convince people to take appropriate action. McKibben said the US House of Representatives recently voted 242 to 180 to pass a

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resolution saying, “Global warming does not exist.”

“The problem is not ignorance on the part of our leaders,” McKibben said. “It is cowardice – born from the immense financial power of the most profitable industry humans have ever engaged in.” The lobbying group for the energy industry is the biggest in the country, five times larger than the next major group. Ninety four percent of the funds they gave recently to the Republican and Democratic national committees went to the candidates who deny global warming.

### **350.org**

When McKibben realized we lacked a movement to force change in this country, he founded 350.org with 7 Middlebury seniors in 2008. The number, which is understandable in any language, comes from Hansen’s statement that anything greater than 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide is incompatible with life on earth. The morning of McKibben’s talk, the Cary Institute printout measured 392 ppm. That number, McKibben, says is rising at 2 parts per million per year.

350.org is, as McKibben explained, an international effort to decrease carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere to 350 parts per million. In October 2009, 350.org coordinated 5200 simultaneous rallies in 181 countries, in what CNN called the ‘most widespread day of political action in the planet’s

history.’ They are planning another event for September.

For people in the Maldives it is only a question of time before they become refugees as their country disappears beneath the rising waters of the Indian Ocean.

McKibben admits that “we are not going to prevent global warming. At best we are going to slow it down and keep it from becoming worse than it would otherwise be. But we have no guarantee even of that. However it is our clear moral obligation to try to at least shift the odds in the direction we need to go. It’s not energy independence that we need. We need independence from environmentally ruinous fuels.”