

Interview With Leonardo DiCaprio for ABC News' "Planet Earth 2000"

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Climate Change

Mr. DiCaprio. Mr. President, I want to thank you very much for your time. And as you know, I'm neither a politician nor a journalist, but being given the opportunity to sit down with you here and talk about an issue like global warming was an opportunity as a concerned citizen that I couldn't pass up.

So my first question is, global warming is obviously a controversial topic among scientists and politicians. What is your understanding of what the effects of climate change will have on our future if preventative steps aren't taken immediately?

The President. Well, let me, first of all, thank you for your interest in this because I think it's important that we get citizens more involved in it; and secondly say, I don't think it's all that controversial a topic among scientists. There are a few who say that it's not proven, but we know that the hottest years in recorded history, and certainly in the last 600 years, that 9 of the hottest 11 years have occurred in the last decade.

So, the climate is changing, and the globe is warming at an unsustainable rate. And if it is not slowed and ultimately reversed, what will happen is, the polar ice caps will melt more rapidly; sea levels will rise; you will have the danger of flooding in places like the precious Florida Everglades or the sugarcane fields of Louisiana; island nations could literally be buried. The whole climate of the United States, for example, could be changed where you would have more flooding, more heat waves, more storms, more extreme weather events generally.

And then you'll have some public health consequences. For example, we're already seeing in Africa, for example, malaria being found at higher and higher altitudes where it used to be too cool for the mosquitoes.

So there will be a lot of very bad, more dramatic weather events. There will be a shift in the patterns of agricultural production. There will be flooding that will be quite bad, and there will be more public health crises.

Raising Public Awareness

Mr. DiCaprio. While growing up, I always felt that environmental issues were constantly overlooked, and I watched people band together for various causes which seemed to come and go, and it was almost like they were going in and out of style. So how do we take a misunderstood issue like climate change and not only raise awareness but make its prevention an ongoing commitment?

The President. Well, I think we have to make climate change a local and a personal matter in the same way other successful environmental issues are. You know, since I've been here, we've been able to strengthen the quality of our air, strengthen the quality of our water. We've set aside more land for protection and protected forests than virtually any administration in history, except those of the two Roosevelts, because they were things people could understand and identify with, and they knew how to advocate for, and they understood the benefits.

So I think we have to bring this down to practical applications and convince people that they can do something about it, number one; and number two, we have to talk about the first question you asked me—what the consequences of not doing anything.

But there's so much we can do. We started a project here at the White House called the Greening of the White House. Just by changing the lighting in this whole building, we lowered our electric bills by \$100,000 a year. Then we put in a different sort of roofing system which kept out more heat and cold. Then we put in a more energy-efficient heating system and water system. We brought more energy-efficient equipment—copiers, computers—all with the Energy Star label, which is a totally voluntary thing the Department of Energy provides.

Now, these are things that businesses all across America could be doing. They're things that homes all across America could be doing. We've worked with the Home Builders to help build lower cost housing that will cut energy use by 50 percent. There's one housing development built in the Inland Empire out in southern California, east of L.A., for lower income working people where the average utility bills are 65 percent lower

than in houses of comparable size in the rest of California—just by putting the most modern, thin solar panels on the roofs, by having sensible insulation, by having energy-efficient lighting, and by taking new windows that let in more light and keep out more heat and cold.

These things are out there now, and I think when people know there's actually something they can do, as well as what the consequences of our not acting and not pushing Congress and other countries to act are, then I think you'll see action

Energy-Efficiency Incentives

Mr. DiCaprio. Well, my other question pertaining to that is, if there was a profit incentive there, would that make us pay more attention?

The President. Yes, there should be more of a profit incentive. I mean, right now, for example, if you take the most energy-efficient lighting, it costs you more now, up front, but it lasts so much longer, eventually you turn a profit. And this is true in many processes in all the energy fields.

So what I have proposed to the Congress is that we do basically two things. First of all, we give significant tax breaks to consumers to buy energy-efficient products of all kinds, and that we also give tax breaks for people to manufacture and develop them. And then, that we spend more money on research, like the project we've had that the Vice President headed for new generation vehicles, that we work with the auto companies and the autoworkers union to develop more energy-efficient vehicles and to develop alternative forms of fuel, including biofuels, which could dramatically change the whole future with regard to the greenhouse gases we've put into the atmosphere.

So there's a lot more we can do, and we ought to provide tax incentives to the private sector to help us. But what I want to drive home is that right now it is no longer necessary in order to grow our economy to put more greenhouse gases, which cause global warming, into the atmosphere. You don't have to burn more oil and coal to get richer now. Not in America; not anywhere else.

International Cooperation

Mr. DiCaprio. Now, in Kyoto, in the 1997 Global Conference on Climate Change, it asked industrialized countries to drastically reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. And when we tried to enforce such protocols in developing countries, they came right back to us and said that the U.S. is responsible for a quarter of the greenhouse gases that are going into the atmosphere. How can we not practice what we preach?

The President. Well first, I think we should practice what we preach. And that's why I think it's so important that the Congress pass the budget that I recommended that would dramatically increase our investment in developing the kinds of technologies and alternative fuels that would cut our greenhouse gas emissions.

But I also believe that we have a big stake in working with other countries to convince them that they, too, can grow without increasing greenhouse gas emissions. For example, no matter how much we cut emissions in the United States, since this is a global problem, unless we also get China and India and the countries that have the big rain forests to work with us, we're going to be in real trouble.

So, for example, when I was in Bangladesh recently, I announced a debt-for-nature swap that we were going to help finance with them. I signed a bill to do the same thing with the South American rain forest last year. In India, we signed an agreement by which they committed that as they continue to grow and need more power, that they'll have more and more coming from natural and renewable sources in the future, so that we can work together, because it is a global problem.

But we should lead the way. And since we have already so much technology, and since, as I've just explained, just with these minor things we cut the power bills here at the White House by \$100,000, and we're going to do it across the Federal Government. If the Federal Government alone will do what we did at the White House, we'll save \$750 million a year, and it will be the equivalent in terms of greenhouse gases and climate change of taking 1.7 million cars off the road. We should be doing that.

But we should also work with other countries. I tell other countries, the developing countries, I'm not asking you to give up your growth; I'm not asking you to give jobs up. I'm asking you to pursue a different pattern of energy use, which will give you more growth, more jobs, and a healthier population over the long run. So I think this really is a win-win issue here. This is not the way it used to be 30, 40 years ago. You can grow an economy and use less energy if you do it right.

Raising Public Awareness

Mr. DiCaprio. Why do you think this issue is so constantly overlooked, and why do you think people don't take it seriously enough? And for you, is it as important as something like health care or education?

The President. Oh yes, over the long run, it's one of the two or three major issues facing the world over the next 30 years. I think it's because it takes a long time for the climate to change in a way that people feel it, and because it seems sort of abstract now. That's why I think it's important that programs like this are aired, and people like you—not politicians or scientific experts but citizens—express their concern.

And then it's important that citizens know that it ought to be an issue; it ought to be a voting issue at election time. And I don't say this in a hateful way. It's just that people need to tell the politicians and the candidates they care about this; they want action. But our citizens need to follow the lead of a lot of our religious groups and other civic groups in actually doing things themselves.

Right now, if the American people knew all the options that are available to them and understood the economics, we could do much better. And of course, if my plan were to pass the Congress and we were to give the tax breaks to consumers and manufacturers of these products and technologies, we could do it even faster.

Energy-Efficiency Incentives

Mr. DiCaprio. Now, the major polluters are obviously the big industries, such as the oil companies, who are one of the most powerful lobbies in the world. How do we con-

vince them to change the way they've been doing business for the last century?

The President. Well, for one thing, oil is a depleting resource, and I think that oil companies and coal companies should be given incentives to become energy companies and to promote energy efficiency so that the oil they have will last longer and provide them a more steady stream of income, and so that they can develop other ways of earning money. They should become—they should think of themselves as energy companies, not oil companies.

And if you look at the record, starting with British Petroleum and its leader, some members of the oil industry are beginning to come over to support action on climate change. Some leaders of the auto industry are beginning to come over and support action on climate change. They understand that this is real and that when these gases get up in the atmosphere, it takes at least 50 years for them to dissipate.

So we need to begin now a disciplined effort, which will be good for our economy. I will say again, this is good for the American economy and good for public health. We need to do this, and if we did it from today until the time you're my age, we'd be a much wealthier country, a much healthier country. And with that kind of effort over that length of time, we could head off this crisis.

Mr. DiCaprio. How do we get power companies to replace their coal plants with cleaner technologies? And why don't we make it so expensive for power companies to keep their old coal plants that they have to invest in cleaner fuels?

The President. Well, I think you can do it in two or three ways. I think, first of all, it's important to have very rigorous clean air standards. And I think it's important also to provide them the tax incentives they need to move as quickly as possible to alternative energy sources.

A lot of the most enlightened utilities in America also see conservation itself as an energy source, PG&E in California, for example. But other utilities have understood that our inefficient patterns of using electricity are pressing them to use more traditional energy and emit more greenhouse gases and warm the climate.

So I think what we should do is to have a system where we finance not only the conversion to alternative energy, but also looking at conservation itself as a form of energy. When you save, you do the same amount of work with less energy, and it's like creating more energy in a totally clean way. And I think that we should be financing those things in part with tax breaks from the American Government. And I've pushed for that, and I will continue to do so.

Energy Research

Mr. DiCaprio. Now, you've enacted tax credits for people who want to buy electric and fuel-cell vehicles. What are we doing to encourage oil companies to research alternative fuel technologies like fuel cells?

The President. Well, I want to give tax credits to them, too, to make it easier for them to spend money on that kind of research. And we are doing a lot of the basic research in the Government. The work, for example, we did with the auto companies on developing fuel cells, on developing a dual-fuel electricity and gas engines—

Mr. DiCaprio. A hybrid vehicle.

The President. —hybrid vehicles—the work that we've done to try to help them develop cars that run on electricity, but where the electricity regenerates, the capacity regenerates so they don't have to pull in every 80 miles and juice up the battery again, and a lot of the research we're doing through the Agriculture Department in biofuels—all these things I think are very important. As we do more of that research, the basic research, we then make it more cost effective for the energy companies and for the auto companies to take that basic research and quickly convert it into commercially viable research to develop products.

So I think our research at the national level should increase as well. I think it's very, very important that the Federal Government do that. You know, to get out of the energy context, the Internet basically began as a federally funded research project. So a lot of the things we take for granted today in the private sector began with a heavy investment of basic research from the National Government. And I think we're still at a point where the National Government should be doing

a lot of this basic research. I'll just give you one example.

If we could—suppose we get cars that will get 70 miles to the gallon, 80 miles to the gallon. And then suppose they can run on clean biofuels that don't have any greenhouse gas emissions, instead of gasoline. Now, what's the problem today? The problem today is it takes about 7 gallons of gasoline to produce 8 gallons of ethanol or other biofuel. So the researchers today are working on a chemical breakthrough which would permit you to produce 8 gallons of biofuel with 1 gallon of gasoline. If you did that, if you improve the ratio 8 to 1, and you had a car getting 70 miles to the gallon, it would be like getting 500 miles to the gallon of gasoline in terms of greenhouse gas emissions.

Then the whole future of the world would be different. I mean, this whole issue would be radically different. And then Americans, simply by buying fuel that would be cost effective, could whip this problem. And we're on the verge of those kinds of breakthroughs, but we need the energy companies to think of themselves as that—not oil and coal but energy; we need the auto companies to keep supporting the work of combating global warming, not pretending it doesn't exist, and many of them are today; and we need more action from ordinary citizens, smaller businesses, and the Government to promote energy conservation and alternative energy sources.

But again I say, this is not a problem that requires big taxes, big regulation, and slow economic growth. It is no longer necessary—in the information economy, with the dramatic scientific breakthroughs already made, we can grow economies faster by conserving energy rather than burning it up. And that's what people don't yet believe. That's the real big debate out there. If we can get people to really believe that we could have a great future using less energy, not more—traditional energy, I mean—then we'd have the battle half won.

And maybe that will come out of this program. Because there's nothing so dangerous to society than being in the grip of a big idea that isn't true anymore. And it is just no longer true that for America or India or China or Latin America or any other place

to grow wealthy, they have to put more greenhouse gases in the atmosphere by burning up more coal and oil. That's just not true anymore. And so we have to show people that that's not true, and show them how they can make a difference, and then keep making these products and technologies available so that it becomes easier and easier and easier to do what is not only the right thing environmentally but the right thing for our long-term economic and public health purposes

Fuel Efficient Transportation

Mr. DiCaprio. Many people have said in the past that the American dream was to buy a car and live in the suburbs. But it has created massive problems that have made us more reliant on our cars. Since it is so difficult for us to convince people to use mass transportation, how can we promote hybrid vehicles and convince people to give up their SUV's? For instance, if it only costs \$575 a car to make them cleaner, why can't you make it a law, like seatbelts?

The President. Well, I'm not sure that it only costs \$575 to make them cleaner in terms of greenhouse gas emissions. But let me say what I think ought to be done. I think—first of all, I think if these SUV's are going to be sustainable over the long run, they also are going to have to become much more fuel-efficient and be able to run on alternative fuels. And I think the American people would pay a little more if they would do that. And the auto companies for the first time have said now that they want to bring in the SUV's and their other less efficient vehicles into this sort of new energy future that we're trying to build.

Secondly, I think that people will take mass transit more if it works better. I've worked very hard to support more investments in mass transit to make it more convenient and faster, including more high-speed rail. And I still believe that as our urban areas become more and more populated and traffic becomes more congested, quite apart from pollution in the air, if we can have clean, efficient, and fast mass transit, people will begin to take it more and more and more—because they can do other things. They're not wasting so much time if they're riding the train.

So I'm hopeful that you will see that. I very much hope that we will continue to develop mass transit alternatives, and I believe they will become much more popular with people, especially in the highly populated areas. But we can't stop the development of fuel efficiency because a lot of our people live in rural areas and drive a long way to work, and that's not going to change anytime soon.

Environmental Standards

Mr. DiCaprio. Now, Louisiana is the second largest consumer of fossil fuels and the city most at risk for sea level rise. Can't something be done, like in Atlanta, where the Government withheld highway funds, making it the model city for environmental responsibility?

The President. Yes, we can. But under the law, we can only withhold these highway funds if the air pollution of a given metropolitan area is so high and they haven't done anything about it, anything else about it. Then we can withhold the highway funds. They have to come up with an alternative program, which usually involves mass transit or carpooling or some other means to reduce air pollution, and in this case, also to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

And I'm sorry to say I don't know exactly the answer to your question, but it may be that for other reasons, New Orleans is in full compliance with the Federal laws on air pollution. I'll just have to look and see.

But we've tried to do that in more than one other place, to use the obligation of a city, a big metropolitan area, to have clean air to promote the development of alternative energy technologies and alternative travel patterns. And I do think that environmental standards can be used that way.

In other words, instead of telling people we're going to shut you down, or imposing big, heavy, complicated regulations, say, "Here's the standard; if you want the money, meet the standard." And then, in Atlanta, they figured out something to do that was very good for the environment, and they got their money.

Citizen Involvement

Mr. DiCaprio. Now, I'm sure you've heard so many reports from scientists and politicians and citizens. What do you think the best course for American citizens is within the next 20 years as far as helping the environment is concerned?

The President. Well, the biggest global problem by far on the environment is global warming. The biggest problem in many developing countries right now is safe water. We still have huge numbers of children dying from diarrhea and other related diseases and problems because they don't have safe water. And there are local air pollution problems that are horrible in various places.

But internationally, the biggest problem is global warming. And I think the most important thing we can do is, every citizen must first understand that he or she can do something about this, and it won't bankrupt them. They should have their homes, their cars, their businesses, everything they do should be oriented toward energy efficiency and alternative energy technologies. And then they should make this one of the issues that has to be discussed by public officials running for office at every level. This has to become not just an issue that we talk about once a year on Earth Day but an issue that is debated along with health care and education and national security and other issues at every election.

You know, I was fortunate when I asked Vice President Gore to join me in 1992 that he had written a book on this, that he was interested in it. He talked to me about it. And so we just, on our own initiative, have done a lot of these things. But we could have had a whole environmental agenda and not dealt with this really very much. And then we had Kyoto, which we strongly supported, the Kyoto Protocol. But this needs to become an issue for every public official. It needs to become a matter of citizen debate.

So I think citizen action, and then citizens as voters turning it into a political issue, in the very finest sense—those are the things that I think need to be done right now and for the next several years to get America on the right track.

Mr. DiCaprio. Do you think we can eventually become a role model?

The President. Absolutely. We should become a role model because, just as we've led the world in information technology with the development of the Internet and digital technology of all kinds, we have the technology here. And there's no excuse for not implementing it comprehensively and quickly in every American community. And there's no excuse for not making it available at an affordable price to every American family.

So if we take this on the way we did the Industrial Revolution, the way we did the information technology revolution, there will be an energy revolution in the 21st century that will save the planet and actually increase health and wealth. That will be one—I predict to you that will be one of the great stories of the 21st century, that there was a dramatic revolution in work caused by a change in the source of energy, in the level of conservation, and in the availability of technologies that just weren't there before.

Mr. DiCaprio. I hope so. Thank you very much for your time. I appreciate it.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at approximately 1 p.m. on the Oval Office Patio at the White House for broadcast on the evening of April 22. This transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on April 23. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Remarks at the White House Easter Egg Roll

April 24, 2000

Thank you very much, and good morning. I'm so glad to see such a wonderful crowd all over the South Lawn, all the way back to the back. I want to also say, as Hillary did, that even though this is our last White House Easter egg roll, and we will miss it very much, we have enjoyed it.

Today Melinda Bates, the Director of our Visitors Office, who's done so much on this over the years, told me that Hillary and I are the only First Couple ever to do this all 8 years we were here. And I think it's because we had more fun than the children did here.

I just want to thank those of you who have had anything to do with this Easter egg roll.