

# THE PUSHY MAN

An interview with Kevin Conrad

*What was going on in your head when the Americans said they could not support the process going forward?*

One old saying says: “When elephants dance, it is the grass that suffers.” In this case, the US delegation appeared to be aiming at the China and India. However, significant advances for poor countries on deforestation and adaptation were caught in the crossfire. While maybe not their intention, the US delegation forced negotiations to the brink of total collapse. It seemed that plea after plea fell on deaf ears. After much consternation, and conferring directly with the PNG Prime Minister, I stumbled into the fray, trying only to keep the “Bali Roadmap” alive. Thankfully, reason prevailed.

*What are the repercussions of the statements you directed towards the US at the Bali negotiation?*

Honestly, I was shocked by how quickly the story reverberated around the world. I was simply doing my job—as were all those on the US delegation. Paula Dobriansky, its head, is a class act who is thoughtful and pragmatic.

You will be the first to know if I am refused entry by US immigration or subjected to a ‘random’ tax audit. But seriously, climate change and tropical deforestation are far too important to get caught up in petty personality issues.

*What ‘out of the box’ ideas do you have to push climate agenda ahead?*

The trick is to make these ideas appear obvious and straightforward. This was our challenge with emissions from deforestation. So we just asked a simple question: can we be serious about climate change and continue to ignore emissions from deforestation—around 20 per cent of the global total? Obviously, no!

Sitting in negotiations today, the industrial world is on one side of the cliff with the developing world on the other, both throwing lightning bolts of empty rhetoric on respective ‘commitments’ across a dark intellectual chasm. In my front row seat, it is scary indeed. Accordingly, our challenge



At the eleventh hour of global climate talks in Bali, the United States declared that it was not prepared to go along with the “Bali Roadmap” text that had been finalized—placing the future of the negotiation and planet on the brink. Kevin Conrad, the Ambassador of Environment and Climate Change for Papua New Guinea, stood up and addressed the US: “We ask for your leadership. . . .but if for some reason you are not willing to lead, leave it to the rest of us. Please get out of the way.” This led to the reversal of the US decision, the likes of which has never been seen on the world’s stage.

is finding a fair and practical framework to cross this political divide. Every country must play its part, and no country can be left behind.

*How might the redistribution of wealth play a role in creating a more sustainable planet?*

I don’t believe simply redistributing wealth will result in a sustainable planet—I have yet to find a direct correlation between wealth and sustainability. Rather, the challenge lies in reengineering our value frameworks. By creating real markets for global ecosystem services, we can launch a new paradigm for sustainable development where rural communities are paid to protect forests. If China and India can earn billions to generate low-cost consumer products and services, should not tropical countries earn billions for keeping our climate stable while conserving needed biodiversity?

*If you could know the answer to any question in the world, what might it be?*

How can global society regain its conscience for sustainable living? Last week, I was working along the Sepik River with an indigenous community that had voted to cancel a logging concession and has subsequently [faced the] ‘opportunity costs’—a school that cannot afford a teacher, a health center with no medicine. Asking why they decided to forgo logging revenues, I was told the forests and rivers provided all they needed to stay alive and had done so for thousands of years. But they feel trapped. The old ways allowed them simply to stay alive, but did not allow their children to get ahead.

Torn between both worlds, it was clear to me that one world still remembers how to live sustainably while the other forgot how in the mad rush to get ahead. However, with new global markets for ecosystem services on the near horizon (such as carbon storage and biodiversity), there may be a chance to bring these two worlds closer to shared sustainability. We must ensure that we do not squander this historic opportunity. **CK**

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