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## Journey to Planet Earth: On the Brink

The Washington Post LIVE Online

*“On the Brink,”* investigates a growing national security threat throughout the world: how environmental pressures can lead to terrorism and regional conflict. **Geoffrey D. Dabelko**, director of the Environmental Change and Security Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and “Journey to Planet Earth” writer/producer/director **Hal Weiner** answered questions.

**Editor’s Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.**

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### TRANSCRIPT:

**Baltimore, Md.:** Seems like areas suffering severe drought (e.g., Afghanistan, Somalia, North Korea) are regions where terrorism has emerged. Is there any connection? Has this been studied?

**Dabelko/Weiner:**

**Hal:** Our show focuses on the relationship between environmental pressures and terrorism.

**Geoff:** It’s very difficult to draw direct links from drought to terrorists, however the message of the show and research in this area is that factors such as drought or resource scarcity should not be neglected when trying to explain political instability or something as specific as terrorism.

**Hal:** One of the case studies focuses on Bangladesh. Though it has an extraordinary amount of water, it’s only for about two months a year. They have severe drought for 8-9 months a year and this contributes to pressures — health, agriculture, economic stability — and what we have seen there was that when you take a combination of environmental and health pressures and instability, riots break out. If you tune in tonight you’ll see very explicit examples.

**Washington, D.C.:** Is there anything in your recent filmmaking experience that has foreshadowed what’s happening in Iraq today?

**Dabelko/Weiner:**

**Hal:** Not specifically Iraq, but in other parts of the world. About a year or two ago, in Kenya, which has experienced major terrorism, we couldn’t walk the streets of Nairobi without armed guards. This was not the case five years ago. In Bangladesh, we were caught in the middle of a pipe bomb explosion that was a perfect example of sporadic examples of violence breaking out for no explicable reason other than dissatisfaction with a regime or way of life. I think that issues in Iraq deal with suppression of some of these feelings on the part of the people and if we had not gone out there there could have been an internal explosion.

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**Geoff:** In some ways, Iraq is very interesting, in the converse way as well. In the first Gulf war in '91 there is some evidence that the Turks were asked to cut the water flow into Iraq from the Tigris and Euphrates — so using water as a weapon of war. The Turks refused to do that. Given the fact that we hear a lot about conflict between states over water. One of the strengths of “On the Brink” is that they focus on issues in states and not between states. That’s really where the action is for enviro scarcities contributing to violence. They’re look at Haiti is a terrific example where critical issues are in a state, but are less salient between states.

**Washington, D.C.:** As a filmmaker traveling abroad for your projects, do you have the sense that people are willing to make changes in their lives to improve their environment?

**Dabelko/Weiner:**

**Hal:** Absolutely. We’ve spent the last several years traveling to something like 20 countries, 400,000 miles putting together this series. Wherever we went and however poor the communities, there was always an NGO trying to find ways of alleviating the problem. In Zimbabwe, a teacher built a damn and created a reservoir where there was no water. In Haiti, small programs are being introduced to alleviate deforestation. There are small programs in Bangladesh trying to alleviate the horrors from cholera epidemics. There was always a desire in the people and it’s very encouraging. The one thing they do lack is money and this really has to come from the west.

**Geoff:** I attended last year’s world summit on sustainable development and just last week in Kyoto, Japan, the world water forum. This confirms Hal’s sentiment, that there are many people on a grass roots level trying to address these problems. These are often dismissed as unsuccessful because the political statements of the governments are often disappointing and don’t carry the promise of money. Nevertheless, the interaction and learning that goes on among these NGOs is absolutely critical to sharing lessons across continents. Often different problems in different locations have ideas that can mean real progress on the ground.

**Hal:** It’s important to realize that there are 1.1 billion people worldwide who don’t have clean drinking water. As soon as we start addressing issues of water and sanitation and health I believe there’s going to be less political pressures and violence.

**Geoff:** And it will increase economies. People will be healthy and able to work. And there are over two billion right now without access to sanitation. These people die from very curable diseases. This is a relatively cheap enviro issue to address. It’s not uncertain what the cause and effects are, the technology is not sophisticated, so it’s a question of resources.

**Albuquerque, N.M.:** What do you think is the greatest threat to U.S. national security and why? Would it be pollution here or abroad, poverty and the gap between rich and poor, cultural differences, or other factors?

**Dabelko/Weiner:**

**Hal:** In our travels, the biggest problem we saw is the gap between the “haves” and “have nots” and that is an overriding message we try to bring out in the series. Tonight we deal with political issues, next week’s on the world’s grasslands. These are home to 800,000 million people and 20

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percent of the land surface is grasslands. The third episode deals with infectious diseases — most of which are diseases of the poor. That show talks about the 1991 cholera outbreak in Peru that hit more than 1 million people. Very few were people who had wealth or were even middle class.

**Geoff:** I would agree that it's that income gap. In fact, if you connect poverty issue to resource issue — it's the pollution of poverty and the pollution of affluence, so it shouldn't be blamed on either. They're contributing in different ways. With poverty as a sense of grievance and environmental factors, it's a fundamental part of the equation. Inequities of participation — a lot of the discussions about the Arab development report, a general assessment of development in the Middle East, a key thing is public participation. So the gap between various countries in many ways is tied to the level of participation. So to address grievances, we need to address the chance to participate.

**Washington, D.C.:** For Geoff and Hal, What are one or two of the most important points that you want people to understand after having viewed this show?

**Dabelko/Weiner:**

**Hal:** For my point of view, the primary objective is to present information in a dramatic, but not advocacy way. We want people to draw their own conclusions about the environment and development. We want people to be knowledgeable about the issues and then they can find local initiatives or visit our Web site.

**Geoff:** A very effective message is that you cannot view enviro issues or health issues in isolation from broader economic, social and political security situations. People working in those areas must understand and integrate these issues into their broader portfolios. My group's fundamental mission is to bring these folks together that don't often talk. You cannot segregate enviro issues into a Dept. of the Environment. Even the military planner — you must integrate. Even the U.S. intelligence community has taken this message to heart. So even institutions you think wouldn't focus on these issues have taken this lesson to heart.

**Scranton, Pa.:** During your travels to the countries profiled in the film, what sort of solutions to these problems do you see being offered by development agencies such as UN, World Bank, USAID? A follow-up to that — where did you see this type of aid as being the most effective?

**Dabelko/Weiner:**

**Hal:** In season one, we focused quite a bit on infrastructure development in China, which is funded by the World Bank. That was extremely successful because the Chinese government is basically without corruption — as compared to the problems that exist in the developing world. Aid that comes out of large organizations often gets lost in corruption. The World Bank has been assessing their policy and trying to overcome this. We saw it in Kenya where a lot of monetary support was stopped with the last regime. The new regime is less corrupt.

**Geoff:** The development and aid agencies are critical. Not just for providing resources. Part of what the aid agencies bring to the table is knowledge and capacity and it increases knowledge in these areas and increasing human capacity. They have the continual challenge of working across topics, so they are kind of segmented, too. So getting the enviro office to work with a population

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office in an agency — that's a real challenge. I think places like USAID recognize that. But I believe they haven't gone far enough yet to explore the full potential of this.

**Hal:** We focus tonight on a community activist in Calcutta working in the most densely populated place in the world. He was adamant in his refusal to work with these agencies because he felt that they didn't understand the nature of the problems. One program he did was to go into communities and raise small amounts of money and build private latrines. Most of these slums do not even have decent latrines for people. As he put it, if you take away the right for a person to defecate in privacy, what else are you taking away — dignity.

**Syracuse, N.Y.:** I've read that during the filming of "On the Brink" you and your film crew narrowly escaped being killed. What happened? What other kind of dangers did you face?

**Dabelko/Weiner:**

**Hal:** When we were in Bangladesh, we'd scouted out a location for the celebration of the New Year that begins on sunrise. We showed up and there were 100,000 people out there and we got to our pre-appointed spot and my partner Marilyn sensed something was wrong and said we are not going there. So we moved about 25 yards away and a minute two pipe bombs went off. People were killed and injured. So, who knows?

When we were in Haiti, the only way we could go into some of the slums is to make friends with the local gangsters. They provided us entrée and they believed in what we were doing. So they would go in, armed, and protect us. You just never know where this comes from.

**McLean, Va.:** Don't the economies need to be improved first, to provide resources to improve the sanitary conditions and maintain a healthy population?

**Dabelko/Weiner:**

**Geoff:** That supposes that economics is not connected to enviro conditions, which in most cases, I would say they are fundamentally linked. Particularly in developing countries where economic wealth is based in the exploitation of natural resources. So, if the environment is left to be neglected, this can undercut productivity and subsistence, then you're chances of getting the economy going first is a big problem. The question is at the crux of how do you approach the environment. There's a notion that you have to be rich to fix the environment. Some say that's what we've done here. But for these developing countries there are no other places to get their natural resources imported from like we do, so we're in a closed system, but there are limits. Not taking the environment into account is ultimately self-defeating.

**Hal:** In Haiti, deforestation definitely affects agriculture, but also the fisheries. Silt coming into them was decimating. We found that you'll have fishing communities that are turning to drug running to support their families. It's a vicious cycle. So where do you start? Not an easy question.

**Athens, Ohio:** What is the U.S. government doing to track and analyze environment and conflict connections?

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**Dabelko/Weiner:**

**Geoff:** They're doing quite a lot — or more than you'd suspect and have been for the past seven or so years. As mentioned before, many of the leaders in this are some sources that you wouldn't think — the intel community, the Defense Dept, and the State Dept, as well as the EPA and others. That has declined somewhat under the Bush administration. It has declined a bit under the Clinton administration, but it tries to integrate environmental considerations into conflict assessment. There's still lots more that could be done. It's not well-coordinated.

**Hal:** Also, you find that a lot of NASA's research, they're space observation of the earth is stabilized governments and communities. In Africa, they are beginning to identify drought situations before they happen. There is a lot of scientific tracking of the environment that is then given to countries around the world and to hopefully stabilize serious problems. This in many ways takes pressure off the people.

**Brooklyn, N.Y.:** This show deals with some very important topics. But in view of what is going on today, why should I watch it instead of something more harmless like "American Idol" for example?

**Dabelko/Weiner:**

**Hal:** We've given our audience a little of this by having Matt Damon as our narrator/host. I think there's nothing wrong with "American Idol", but I do think that TV viewers should set aside time for issues that are important to them, their children and grandchildren. PBS has put on some of the most important scientifically correct shows on this that you can find anywhere.

**Van Ness, Washington, D.C.:** My wife and I just came back from two years as development missionaries for the Anglican Church in southern Africa. My experience was that poor people in desperate conditions lead to many social and health problems. If these same people see (or believe) that others are getting rich and taking advantage of the situation, then you can add political problems to the mix. Missionaries — the first wave of globalization.

**Dabelko/Weiner:**

**Hal:** I will say that one of the great success stories we found was in South Africa. We visited the township of Alexandra, just outside of Johannesburg. Until a few years ago, it was called the most dangerous/violent place in the world. Not without reason. They were experiencing post-apartheid problems. The reason it was a success story, was that the federal government and local communities worked to rehabilitate their infrastructure and it was a wonderful success. This community is well on its way to becoming a model for communities around the world.

We didn't know we would find this success story.

**Geoff:** From a different angle, the question recognizes this grievance of recognizing poor people seeing others doing better as a motivation for conflict. This is important — enviro resources in absolute scarcity is not the absolute worst problem. It's often conditions relative vis-à-vis other groups. If one group is particularly aggrieved, the probability for violence is higher. If one group of people controls natural resources, that contributes to grievances.

In North Africa, where water is scarce, in some places you have conflict and others not.

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**Washington, D.C.:** If there is one single thing that a person can do to improve the environment, what would that be?

**Dabelko/Weiner:**

**Geoff:** Educate yourself and then act on it. Learn more about how little changes can make a big difference in your resource consumption. It can be mundane like installing an efficient toilet. Make sure the furniture and lumber you buy is certified as being sustainably grown. Understand your actions have implications in places you can't see. Climate change is a condition we contribute to every day. We have the resources to adapt to this, but in Bangladesh say, that subsistence farmer living at sea level can't handle the increase in floods caused by this.

**Hal:** What we try to do with our series is to have a strong education outreach component and we work with nearly 40 science museums around the country who bring in teachers and give them materials that they can educate young kids with in terms of what the issues are. If you educate young people about environment issues, you'll have adults who understand problems.

