

One man's risky bid to save public land

John Dear | Jun. 28, 2011 On the Road to Peace

One of the most astonishing, creative and powerful acts of nonviolent civil disobedience in recent U.S. history took place on Dec. 17, 2008, in Salt Lake City, Utah.

In its last weeks, the George W. Bush administration put 150,000 acres of pristine Eastern Utah public land up for auction for leasing to the oil and natural gas industry. Not only would the land be sold and destroyed, this deal would worsen catastrophic climate change.

An undergraduate student at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City named Tim DeChristopher decided to do something.

DeChristopher had been studying oil and gas leasing and how it destroys the land and creates catastrophic climate change. He walked over to the auction, wondering how he could protest the sale of public land. Perhaps he might stand up, give a speech, and disrupt the proceedings. But to his surprise, as he entered the building, he was asked if he had come to bid on the land.



"I immediately saw the opportunity to make a major impact," DeChristopher told me on the phone last week from Salt Lake City as he recounted the episode.

He signed in and was named "Bidder #70." Of course, he had no money. The auction started and before long, he had "bought" 22,000 acres of public land near Moab and Canyon Lands National Park, one of the most beautiful regions in the North America -- for \$1.8 million!

"Before the bidding began, I sat there for twenty minutes and weighed the consequences of that action," said DeChristopher. "I had signed a piece of paper saying that I understood it was a federal offense to bid with no intent to pay."

"I thought, "If I do this, I will go to prison for years," but I could live with prison. Then I thought, "If I don't do this, and turn my back on this opportunity, then I will have to witness the destruction of this land, knowing that I had a chance to do something."

"I decided that I couldn't live with that. So I started bidding. People were looking around at me, giving me dirty looks, muttering under their breath. And I drove up the prices. Finally, after I won 14 parcels, they announced a five minute break. A federal agent came over to me, showed me his badge and said, "Let's talk outside."

"He asked me what my intention was. I said my intention was to stand in the way of the auction because it was a threat to the environment. I was questioned for three hours and released."

The auction was suspended so that the courts could investigate "the incident." Weeks later, after President Obama's inauguration, Ken Salazar, the new Interior Secretary, announced that the Bureau of Land Management hadn't followed the rules, so he invalidated the auction and kept the land in public hands.

But then, in April 2009, the Obama administration indicted DeChristopher on federal charges.

"Developing and burning oil and natural gas is one of the primary drivers of climate change," DeChristopher says.

"The auction was a prime example of the "Drill now, think later" approach that drives our policy. The auctioneers didn't even know what lands they were selling. It was totally reckless.

"Some parcels in Moab, Utah, that were up for auction, had houses on them. One parcel of land was under the Moab golf course. And according to the law, to the Bureau of Land Management and the Department of the Interior, they are required to weigh the impact of climate change in any decision or sale. But the Bureau of Land Management did not even pretend they were following the law."

DeChristopher knew better and took action.

He is a true hero, and like any authentic hero, he's about to pay a terrible price for doing the right thing. DeChristopher was convicted March 3 of "disrupting a federal auction and making false statements on federal forms to enter the auction," and must pay \$750,000 in total fines for "purchasing \$1.8 million in oil and gas leases with no intent to pay," *The New York Times* has reported.

DeChristopher, who is 29 years old, will be sentenced July 26 in Salt Lake City. He faces ten years in federal prison.

"[DeChristopher's] prosecution is evidence that our moral order has been turned upside down," Chris Hedges [wrote over at Common Dreams last week](#) [1].

"The bankers and swindlers who trashed the global economy and wiped out some \$40 trillion in wealth amass obscene amounts of money, much of it provided by taxpayers," writes Hedges.

"They do not go to jail. Regulatory agencies, compliant to the demands of corporations, refuse to impede the destruction unleashed by the coal, oil and natural gas companies as they turn the planet into a hothouse of pollutants, poisoned water, fouled air and contaminated soil in the frenzied quest for greater and greater profits.

"Those who manage and make fortunes from pre-emptive wars, embrace torture, carry out extrajudicial assassinations, deny habeas corpus and run up the largest deficits in human history are feted as patriots.

?But when a courageous citizen such as Tim DeChristopher peacefully derails the corporate and governmental destruction of the ecosystem, he is sent to jail.?

I asked DeChristopher if he thought this outrageous race to ruin the land and destroy the climate was particularly unusual to the Bush Administration.

?In some ways, oil development ramped up under the Bush Administration and became more visible,? he answered, ?but that was only in part because of his ties to the oil industry. It?s the nature of the path we?re on. We have exhausted all the easily accessible oil. We?ve had to branch out with our energy development into places that are much more visible. Natural gas development in Pennsylvania and New York is much more visible.?

What can people do to fight climate change? I asked.

?People should take action that is more political than personal,? said DeChristopher. ?We?re told to make consumer lifestyle changes, but we?re far more powerful using our roles as citizens and community members, rather than as consumers. We can have a bigger impact through political activism.?

?We need to acknowledge that it is too late for emissions reductions alone to stop climate change,? he continued.

?All the catastrophic things we?ve been warned about are now happening. That does not mean that all is lost, but we?re definitely headed toward the most intense period of change that humanity has ever seen. So it really matters who is in charge as the structures start to fall apart. As citizens, we can play a role in deciding who is in charge, who will steer our future course.?

He continued:

As things start to collapse, it will be really ugly if the corporations are still running the show and most citizens think they have to be obedient and take whatever they get. But with an awakened citizenship, we can steer society toward a healthier, more humane world. We need to establish stronger local authority, stronger, more just, local communities. Our tactics and our strategies need to reflect this new reality.

We are headed toward catastrophic consequences, so it doesn?t make sense to try to convince the corporations to be cleaner and greener. We need to overthrow corporate power and reestablish people power and community power.

We have been disempowered. We?ve become extremely alienated and hyper-individualized. We need to build up real local communities. We may have to start from scratch for that to happen. If we can build self-sufficient communities that claim their political power, that has the potential to radiate out and influence others.

Civil disobedience can play an important part in the movement. It helps undermine the moral legitimacy of the government, the current power structure. Civil disobedience gets through to people in a very human way, as people begin to understand that the only way the status quo can continue is if they put people like us in jail. That has a powerful impact and helps people reconsider the moral authority we grant to our leaders.

?When I went into the auction, I had a direct action mindset,? Tim told me. ?I thought, ?If I can cause enough chaos, if I can keep that oil in the ground, then it?s worth it.? That happened. But the indirect impact has been

far more powerful. The action has affected others and started a public discourse. That's been far more impactful even than protecting 22,000 acres.

"I also went into the action thinking of it as a sacrifice, that I was sacrificing my freedom. But since then, I realized that's not true. The sacrifice was forcing myself to be obedient to this destructive system. The only way to not resist was to think of myself as a helpless victim. That was disempowering.

"Once I took that step at the auction, and started resisting, I've felt liberated. It's been extremely liberating. As folksinger Utah Phillips said, "The degree to which we resist is the degree to which we are free." The personal rewards are huge."

"Civil disobedience puts us in a vulnerable position," DeChristopher told Hedges. "It puts us in a position where we are refusing to be obedient to injustice. Civil disobedience puts us in a position where we are making a risk and possibly making a sacrifice to stand up against that injustice.

"It also puts us in a position where with that vulnerability we see how much we need other people. This is something I have experienced over the past few years as people have come out of nowhere to support me, to make actions more powerful and to help me personally get through this experience and grow from it. Appreciating these connections is one of the most important parts of resiliency.

"A lot of the unwillingness to take bold action is coming from a disempowerment that comes from a lack of connection. When we view ourselves as isolated individuals it does not make sense to stand up to a big powerful institution like a big corporation or big government. It is not until we gain the understanding that we are part of something much bigger that we feel empowered to take those necessary actions.

"This is a self-reinforcing cycle. The more we stick our neck out the more connected we become and the more empowered we become to do it again."

I asked DeChristopher about the faith and spirituality behind his action.

"There's two ways my church and my spirituality have empowered me," he said. "My church community has been extremely supportive over the last two and a half years. Knowing that there were people in my church who would support me helped me to take this step.

"Also, my spiritual sense of the interconnectedness of all life has helped me. I believe that I am a deeply rooted part of a much bigger whole, and that spiritual sense came into my decision when I was weighing the consequences of my action. The progressive movement is missing that sense that we are connected to something larger than ourselves."

"Nonviolence, for me, is a strategic decision," he added. "When I look at social movements that have been successful, I see they have been nonviolent. Violent movements get crushed, and people don't care about them. Movements are most powerful when they are nonviolent. Nonviolent movements can really undermine the moral authority of the government and help us claim our power."

I was so inspired by DeChristopher's action when I first heard about it. I'm equally inspired by his passion for "climate justice," and by the good spirit within him as he faces prison.

I told him he reminded me of Jesus who walked into the Temple, where the religious authorities worked with the landholders and the imperial rulers to steal the resources of the poor, and turned over the tables of the money-changers.

Jesus, too, disrupted business as usual through nonviolent civil disobedience. He too spoke out for justice and peace and accepted the consequences.

Of course, the government should drop all charges against DeChristopher. Obama should give him a medal; make him Interior Secretary; follow his lead; stop all coal, oil and gas drilling; and begin a serious fight against catastrophic climate change.

I hope my friends in Salt Lake City and elsewhere will join the vigil outside the courtroom for Tim's sentencing July 26. (Details can be found [at his group's website here](#) [2].)

I hope we can all find inspiration from Tim DeChristopher's bid for climate justice, and do our part to save the earth and reclaim our humanity.

[Editor's Note: John Dear's column is on a summer schedule and will be posted every other week through early August.]

Next year, John Dear will undertake a national book tour for his forthcoming book, *Lazarus Come Forth!*, which portrays Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To host John in your church or school for an evening talk and book-signing, send an email through www.johndear.org [3]. This week, on July 1-2, John will offer a workshop in Chicago on Jesus' teachings on peace, hope and love at Loyola Univ. (To attend, go to: www.asrenewal.org [4]) From August 8-15, he will offer a weeklong retreat on Jesus' teachings on peace, hope and love at the spectacular Ghost Ranch Center in New Mexico (www.ghostranch.org). John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund, go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2011/06/20-11>

[2] <http://www.peacefuluprising.org>

[3] <http://www.johndear.org>

[4] <http://www.asrenewal.org>

[5] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>