

## Stewart Brand: From hippy icon to nuclear enthusiast

22 March 2010 by [Liz Else](#)

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*Environmentalist, thinker, mover, shaker. If it was "happening" in the sixties and seventies, Stewart Brand was there. Now he tells Liz Else why green ideology is flawed and nuclear power and slums are good*

IT IS a civilised plan: an afternoon with futurist, visionary thinker and all-round hippy icon Stewart Brand. This is a rare chance to meet the man who helped forge the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s and infuse it with environmentalism.

He was immortalised in the Tom Wolfe

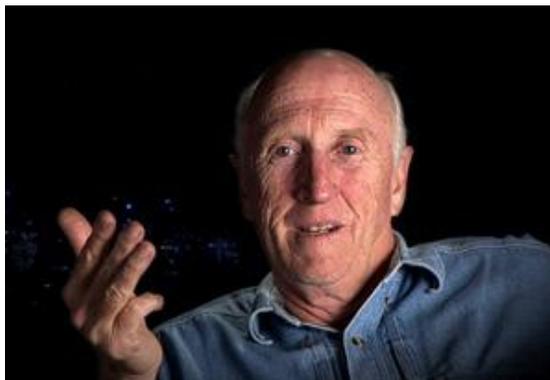
1968 cult classic *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, a novel about Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, a band of LSD-taking, magic-bus-travelling, communal-living experimenters. Shortly afterwards, Brand published the giant-sized *Whole Earth Catalog*, which set out to provide information or, as he termed it, "tools", for the millions of Americans then living communally or alternatively.

Fast-forward to London 2010, and Brand is promoting his latest book, *Whole Earth Discipline*. Unluckily, the local wine bar is noisy when we arrive, with a table full of post-prandial lawyers making conversation tricky. But Brand is unfazed: it will take more than a few drunks to dent the spry, sharp but genial public persona he has spent much of his 71 years cultivating. Then again, maybe there is something in the drinking water of supercool California where he has lived for decades - on a tugboat in Sausalito during the week, and at weekends in Petaluma, next to California's largest intact salt marsh.

Zoning in past the noise, Brand is saying heart-warming things about London and *New Scientist*. Then come the bombshells. Nuclear power. Now. Slums good. At the back of my mind, the word "heresy" is half-forming. But perhaps I should not be surprised by what to many may seem like a change of heart: after all, the subtitle of his new book is *An Ecopragmatist Manifesto*.

He elaborates: "What would a green pragmatist do about the seemingly intractable issues we're facing? A pragmatist would say ideology doesn't help solve problems. Often it helps build loyalty, motivate people, helps people feel all warm about something, but it's not much help thinking through problems and coming up with creative solutions, most of which are usually against the ideology."

The "Whole Earth" part is a conscious reprise of the sixties *Whole Earth Catalog*. The US edition even uses the black of the original cover plus the first-ever shot of Earth from an Apollo spacecraft. This time though it really does mean "whole Earth" - not "tools" for American drop-outs. "My book's big themes - climate change, urbanisation and biotechnologies - are all global phenomena," says Brand. "And 'discipline' is my way of trying to get people comfortable with putting ideology aside for a while."



"Thank goodness the world is chock-full of nuclear weapons" (Image: c.Zeitgeist/Everett/Rex Features)

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## Discipline is my way of getting people comfortable with putting ideology aside

Surely not? Brand abandoning ideology? Old-style greens are clearly in for a bashing. One of his big hates is "nature right, humans wrong" thinking: nature, after all, is far from good, kind or efficient. So what changed him?

The seeds were sown back in 1968 when his biology teacher at Stanford University, Paul Ehrlich, published the best-seller *The Population Bomb*. "Within two years," Brand recalls, "the whole environmental movement became the population issue. They said, too many humans are the problem, therefore get rid of humans. Paul's view was that we should put sterilising agents in the water. Well, Paul was wrong, but the green movement valorised him and that's part of what we have to grow out of."

It seems that the green movement gradually became a politically conservative force for Brand. But then with that jaw-dropper about sterilising agents still hanging, we are off again on a whirlwind tour. It's a bit like having Al Gore give you a personal lecture - from a rather different perspective but with just as many curve balls.

In front of our eyes, shanty towns and favelas turn into burgeoning creative hubs. For instance, although Mumbai is more than half-slum, it is responsible for a sixth of India's GDP; women, subsistence farmers and children all do better there than in the villages.

The real dark green shocker, though, is what will power the cities. It has to be fourth-generation nuclear plants, says Brand. "What you do when resisting a whole industry is you say, well, it's not like there's just one problem. There's waste, cost, weapons proliferation, there's a control problem and obviously that adds up to, 'Don't do it'. As an engineer, though, you take the whole issue apart and look at each aspect on its own merits."

So while the *Whole Earth Catalog* advocated wind turbines, now Brand says: "To get a gigawatt capacity of electricity takes 250 square miles of wind farm. Holy smokes! And the wind farm is not on all the time so you're buying French nuclear energy or burning a hell of a lot of natural gas to make up the gap."

And there's a bigger surprise. "Thank goodness the world is chock-full of nuclear weapons," says Brand, "which we'd ideally love to take down to zero in the next decade or two. In the meantime, the US has been buying up the warheads of the former Soviet Union which used to be targeted at American cities, including my home town, Redrock, Illinois." As Brand points out, 10 per cent of American electricity now comes from power plants fuelled by decommissioned Russian nuclear warheads.

Challenging stuff - and not without its critics, including long-time friend Amory Lovins, chief scientist at the Rocky Mountain Institute in Colorado, who attacked what he called the "four myths about nuclear energy" promulgated by Brand and others. These are: that renewables are unreliable; that there is insufficient land for renewables; that nuclear power is required to reduce climate change; and that we need nuclear power as well as renewables.

A new generation won't have this prejudice about nuclear power, says Brand. "There is an

ageing green habit of being anti-technology which does not play with younger people. In nuclear energy you're seeing a generational shift. The online discussions in environmental forums are evenly divided because this community is mostly a 20s and 30s crowd."

Sadly, younger generations have never heard anything optimistic about the world, says Brand of students he has lectured to. They were especially enthralled, he says, by the idea that in the future biotechnology could be used by anyone. And Brand's picture of teams competing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology every September to create new organisms that do strange, wonderful, frivolous and useful things is beguiling.

But before we part, he has a sympathetic word for older greens who have taken a "theological position" and are now seeing a lifetime of hard work slipping away. "In the book I didn't congratulate greens enough for their many extremely important successes, such as restoring wild lions and natural ecosystems services - and the large role in bringing climate change to people's attention." Build on the triumphs, he says, "so the other stuff will feel more comfortable" for them. A truly ecopragmatic message.

### Profile

Stewart Brand set up the *CoEvolution Quarterly*, spanning natural sciences and culture, co-founded [The WELL](#) (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), an online community, and [The Long Now Foundation](#), which promotes "slower/better" thinking. *Whole Earth Discipline* is published by Atlantic Books and Viking

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