



# Robert Blenker of WRB Energy: 5 Things We Must Do To Inspire The Next Generation About Sustainability And The Environment

An Interview With Penny Bauder



Penny Bauder

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Nov 18 · 12 min read



Think globally, act locally. Yes, it may be a cliché, but it still holds true. While we recognize that climate problems are of a global scale, the solutions will come through local direct innovation and action. The actions taken in our homes, businesses, and local communities each day will make a difference.

**A**s part of my series about what we must do to inspire the next generation about sustainability and the environment, I had the pleasure of interviewing Robert Blenker, President and CEO of WRB Energy in Tampa, Fla.

Robert is a veteran renewable energy executive with more than 25 years of experience sourcing, developing, and managing infrastructure projects, specifically in Latin America and the Caribbean. He has developed renewable energy projects, vertically-integrated utilities, and sustainable infrastructure in Honduras, Uzbekistan, Nigeria, Colombia, Jamaica, Turks and Caicos, Dominica, Grenada, and the U.S. Robert graduated from The Ohio State University with a BS in wildlife management and journalism and earned a MAIA in business and development economics from Ohio University.

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**Thank you so much for doing this with us! Our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about how you grew up?**

**G**rowing up in Ohio, my grandparents and parents were very purpose-driven and actors of change in their own way. I have a letter that my grandfather wrote to me and my brothers on the events of the first lunar landing in 1969. He said, “the world is filled with people with good ideas, but the world is changed by people who act on those ideas.” From an early age, I heard the message that it’s not good enough to have good thoughts. One must act on those thoughts.

I was also fortunate to be influenced by excellent mentors. My interest in the outdoors and the natural world was stoked by my family as well as my fifth-grade science teacher, Roger Peterson. Binoculars in one hand and pipe in the other, he would lead us on outdoor adventures through woodlands, pastures, dip-netting in fecund Ohio ponds and catching snakes. In me, and nearly all the children he taught, he awakened a sense of awe and wonder in the natural world and the interconnectedness of our environment.

That experience was broadened by another mentor, Barry Wakeman, at the Cincinnati Zoo. From the age of 12 to 18, I spent every weekend and most weekdays at the zoo. In fact, my mother would often tell people I grew up in the zoo! Barry helped people understand the connections between the environment and humanity and our role as participants in the natural world. He put me in some crazy, dangerous situations. At age 16 in Kenya, while trying to net bats on the shore of Lake Jipe, I found myself face-to-face with lions in the middle of the night, being chased by elephants in Tsavo East, and handling a snake that we later learned was poisonous. His lessons taught us about independence, personal accountability, and social responsibility.

Barry’s influence led me to spend 15 years with the Peace Corps. I wanted to help bring change to the world by understanding different perspectives and viewpoints and to share those lessons in the U.S. Barry’s influence was profound and shaped the development of many of my peers in a similar way.

**Was there an “aha moment” or a specific trigger that made you decide you wanted to become a scientist or environmental leader? Can you share that story with us?**

I remember Professor Townsend at Ohio State who taught wildlife management. He triggered an ethos that has become stronger over time. His philosophy about sustainability resonated throughout my subsequent studies and Peace Corps service, ultimately leading me to my work in the renewable energy field. He emphasized that sustainability is defined and measured using various metrics: environmental sustainability, technological sustainability, social sustainability and economic sustainability. They are all connected.

For example, he posited that sustainability — in the context of wildlife management — is about generating the revenue necessary to ensure the conservation and preservation of diverse habitats. We need to assign economic value to the concepts of a diverse environment to help ensure sustainability. It's one thing to preserve land and wildlife legally — with laws — but it's another to motivate citizens to participate in conservation with individual actions to support and sustain environments. That was a watershed moment for me. Creating an economically viable infrastructure valuing conservation and the wise stewardship of natural resources was vital. While this concept seems pretty obvious now as we look at the economic reality of confronting and mitigating the impacts of climate change, it was novel thinking then.

I saw how critical natural spaces are to human psychology. The need for wild places is universal. The benefits range from the meditative qualities and abstract appreciation to the health benefits of being in an undeveloped environment to the resiliency they lend to agriculture and vital resources like clean water. That's why people in urban areas derive mental benefits and satisfaction by donating to The Nature Conservancy and other environmental foundations. They feel good contributing to the preservation of a place they value but may never visit. Why does a kid in urban Chicago get excited about saving elephants? It goes beyond empathy for animals. There's a psychological and emotional connection between people and nature.

The connection between humans and the environment relates to feedback loops. I think one of the problems we have now is that many of the traditional feedback loops people have with their environment have collapsed — been broken — as a result of globalization. For example, if fish stocks in Florida are depleted by over-fishing, you don't feel the impact because you can buy fish caught elsewhere. That negative feedback loop is broken, at least for a time. Another example, if agricultural yields fail in a given area, people just buy grain from somewhere else. However, with climate change, there is growing awareness of the importance of reestablishing those feedback loops. It reflects Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Humans have been able to fend off Malthusian curves through globalization. But with climate change and growing global consciousness, we are beginning to reconnect the dots between established environmental feedback loops within local ecosystems.

**Is there a lesson you can take out of your own story that can exemplify what can inspire a young person to become an environmental leader?**

There are two lessons. First, it's important to follow your true passion and to do so fearlessly. Secondly, be an agent of change.

**Can you tell our readers about the initiatives that you or your company are taking to address climate change or sustainability?**

**Can you give an example for each?**

Combatting climate change relates back to the elements of sustainability. We evaluate renewable projects based on technological sustainability, environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, as well as cultural sustainability. We weigh those factors to determine how we can have the biggest impact on the most people within the capabilities of a midsize private enterprise.

Given that WRB Energy works primarily in emerging economies, what may be considered innovative or cutting-edge technology may not be the most appropriate, or sustainable given economic realities. That's why we focus on technologies that capitalize on what is already a relatively small environmental footprint compared to more industrialized nations. For example, an average residential electric customer in Dominica or Grenada consumes about 100 to 250 kilowatt-hours (kWh) per month. By comparison, the average resident in the Tampa Bay area consumes 10 times that with an average of 1,100 to 2,500 kWh per month. So how do we take the already modest footprint of a resident in the Caribbean, maintain that small footprint through the appropriate application of proven technologies, such as rooftop solar, energy efficiency and energy storage, in a way that is economically sustainable and promotes development. There is limited disposable income in developing countries and there are rarely government subsidies. So renewables have to be commercially viable, technologically proven, and offer the best solution cost-effectively. That's why more capital-intensive, exotic technologies are not always appropriate for many emerging economies.

**Can you share 3 lifestyle tweaks that the general public can do to be more sustainable or help address the climate change challenge?**

1. Consume less. In general, stop buying what you don't need. Eat lower on the food chain, i.e. plant-based food.
2. As much as possible, select products that are sustainably produced and harvested. Money talks. Vote with your wallet (if you can afford to do so. A product is generally considered sustainable if it doesn't deplete natural resources, its production and distribution use as little energy as possible, and it can be disposed of with minimal waste stream or harm to the environment. Seek out and support companies that are making efforts to increase sustainability and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the way they do business. According to PwC's 2021 [Global Consumer Insights](#), the top three grocery attributes that consumers are willing to pay more for are: locally produced, healthier options (less processed), and sustainably packaged.

3. Third, rethink transportation. One of the upsides of the pandemic is the ability for many people to work remotely, either all or some of the time. I believe that's a shift that will remain. I hope to see a decline in our dependence on cars and traveling long distances to work. According to the [Sierra Club](#), transportation accounts for the greatest share of greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S. (29%). By teleconferencing, videoconferencing, bicycling, walking, carpooling, taking public transportation, living and working in walkable, transit-friendly communities, and traveling less, we can decrease pollutants and reduce land development for new roads and sprawling neighborhoods. These efforts help protect undeveloped natural spaces and wildlife habitats.

**Ok, thank you for all that. Here is the main question of our interview: The youth led climate strikes of September 2019 showed an impressive degree of activism and initiative by young people on behalf of climate change. This was great, and there is still plenty that needs to be done. In your opinion what are 5 things parents should do to inspire the next generation to become engaged in sustainability and the environmental movement? Please give a story or an example for each.**

1. Help the next generation understand that climate change is an existential problem but there are solutions. We want to instill a sense of importance and hope while avoiding despair and futility.
2. Emphasize the concept of personal responsibility and accountability. Encourage the value of having an inquisitive mind, looking at the true connections between cause and effect. People need to understand and believe in the impact of their daily decisions on the climate. Dig more deeply than superficial social media posts and understand the true costs.
3. Take actions that can move the needle in the right direction, such as eliminating plastics in oceans and landfills, avoiding household products with toxic chemicals, consuming less, and reusing and recycling more. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature ([IUCN](#)), at least eight million tons of plastic end up in our oceans every year, threatening the marine environment, ocean health, food quality and safety, coastal tourism, and contributing to climate change.
4. Support economic literacy to understand how economic decisions impact the environment and our future. Again, sustainability is at the heart of integrating economics, technology, and the environment.
5. Think globally, act locally. Yes, it may be a cliché, but it still holds true. While we recognize that climate problems are of a global scale, the solutions will come through local direct innovation and action. The actions taken in our homes, businesses, and local communities each day will make a difference.

**How would you articulate how a business can become more profitable by being more sustainable and more environmentally conscious? Can you share a story or example?**

First, energy efficiency has a direct economic impact on businesses. The least-cost kWh or therm is the one you don't consume. According to the

U.S. Department of Energy ([DOE](#)), the buildings sector accounts for about 76% of electrical use and 40% of all U.S. primary energy use and associated greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Retrofitting existing buildings and processes is a start, followed by introducing advanced and renewable technologies that use less energy in new construction. There are economic and environmental dividends to being energy-, material- and resource-efficient. We are already doing more work with less energy than even a few years ago — driving farther on less fuel, using more screen time with less electricity.

Second, listen to your customer and help them understand the significance of sustainability in the products they buy. As companies aim for net-zero waste streams and enhanced ESG (environmental, social and governance) commitments, they can position themselves well in the eye of the consumer, by creating resource-efficient products within an environmentally-conscious corporate philosophy. However, sustainability claims must be substantiated with credible data sources to maintain integrity.

I would encourage companies to think about new business models within the framework of a [circular economy](#) where the goal is to eliminate waste and pollution by reusing products and materials in a regenerative, environmentally sound manner. Unlike a linear approach where we *take* from nature, *make* products used once, and then discard as *waste*, a circular approach provides a continuous cycle for renewal and replenishment within industries which can create jobs, generate revenue, stimulate economies, and protect the environment. The International Institute for Sustainable Development ([IISD](#)), shares a variety of reports showing the economic impact of energy efficiency, material efficiency and renewable energy on job creation and GDP increases.

There's much discussion about whether electric vehicles (EVs) are better for the environment when you factor in the total lifecycle costs and environmental impacts of greenhouse gas emissions for sourcing materials, building, fueling, operating and maintaining a car over its lifetime. A recent [Wall Street Journal](#) article, [Are Electric Cars Really Better for the Environment?](#) enlisted researchers at the University of Toronto to address the impact of electric vehicles, comparing emissions generated from a combustion-engine Toyota RAV4 and a Tesla Model 3. The study concluded that all cars generate emissions, but EVs generate less. However, the long-term environmental impact is yet to be determined based on numerous factors, including governmental EV policies and mandates, EV manufacturing and distribution processes, electricity generation and charging infrastructure, disposal costs, and consumer demand. For more information, visit: <https://www.wsj.com/graphics/are-electric-cars-really-better-for-the-environment/>.

**None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?**

Yes. I often think of Don Boucher. He was the Peace Corps Country Director in Uruguay where I was just learning to manage people. We were polar opposites. We could not have been more different. However, I

came to refer to him as “coach” Don because from him I learned how to see and honor the greatness in others. He saw and brought out the best in every one of us.

While I was very focused on the rules and systems for getting things done — I would often ask, “what does the manual say?” or “what is the policy on this?” His focus was on other elements. He saw the rich potential and uniqueness in each person. I witnessed him unleash the greatness in everybody — people from different political spectra, different cultural backgrounds, people very different from him. He also knew how to share ideas so that everyone could find commonality — he made things exciting.

Since then, I have found myself reaching out to Don for grounding and guidance whenever I have a particularly troubling or complicated issue with staff. He will always steer me away from “who is right or wrong” to asking, “how can you get people to share the same goal?”

**You are a person of great influence and doing some great things for the world! If you could inspire a movement that would bring the greatest amount of good to the greatest amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)**

I think the more people can have honest and thoughtful fact-based conversations, the better off we all would be. It doesn't mean everybody has to agree with each other. People need to take initiative and responsibility to understand the facts, value another person's perspective, and be willing to accept the differences in viewpoints with compassion. Much of the discord in the world is unnecessary and could be avoided.

I also believe in the power of gratitude, acknowledging and expressing appreciation every day for the people and places that touch our lives.

*“Cultivate the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously. And because all things have contributed to your advancement, you should include all things in your gratitude.”*

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

**Do you have a favorite life lesson quote? Can you tell us how that was relevant to you in your own life?**

That's a tough one. Do I choose something from Thoreau's Walden? From Leaves of Grass? Or perhaps something from E.O. Wilson's On Human Nature of The Social Conquest of Earth?

I think I will have to stick with my favorite — A Road Not Taken, by Robert Frost. “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood...” The meaning of this work has changed for me over time. It is the very ambiguity and uncertainty of self-determination that I find compelling. Actions have consequences. And we can determine our path.

**What is the best way for people to follow you on social media?**

**LinkedIn**

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/robert-blenker-2867a56/>

or

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/wrb-energy/?viewAsMember=true>

This was so inspiring. Thank you so much for joining us!

Wellness



WRITTEN BY

**Penny Bauder**

Environmental scientist-turned-entrepreneur, Founder of Green Kid Crafts

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