

12 QUESTIONS TO CAREL CARLOWITZ MOHN

1. From your point of view, what are today's most pressing environmental problems?

It is quite unoriginal to state, but the most pressing environmental problems are the looming twin crises we are facing regarding biodiversity and climate change.

2. When looking at potential improvements in our environment, what gives you hope?

Humans are equipped with a very rich arsenal of tools and resources to deal with challenges in their external living environment. Political history has shown that human learning processes are often non-linear. In other words, on the one hand we are moving towards dangerous tipping points in the physical environment, and on the other hand there seem to be social tipping points beyond which changes towards ecologically sound practices are possible. For example: the recent high court verdicts in Germany and the Netherlands on climate policy have the potential to fundamentally change our way of thinking about the "limits to growth" and the existential limitations to our liberties that come along with continued greenhouse emissions and environmental destruction.

3. Is there a particular environmental policy reform you admire the most?

Yes, the rapid expansion of renewable energies in Germany in the early 2000s. At that time, local communities and, namely, cooperatives were given a very clear and easy-to-operate framework under which they could invest into solar parks and wind turbines. This framework ensured local ownership and local acceptance, and thereby put the energy system transformation that we need on a more solid societal basis. I was actively involved in this reform as I am a member of two energy cooperatives in the federal state of Brandenburg.

4. Which trend in environmental policy and politics do you consider an aberration?

50 years after the publication of *The Limits to Growth*, commissioned by the *Club of Rome*, we have yet to develop an integrated approach to deal with the fact that all natural systems have external, physical restraints and limitations. We have gradually begun to understand that our carbon budget is limited. Good! Simultaneously, here in Germany, we are still working with land, with soil, as if there are no limitations. Almost all political parties see the only solution to housing shortages as the construction of ever more buildings – in a country that is taking 60 hectares a day out of natural cycles by pouring concrete or asphalt over it; in a country that already has one of the highest rates of living space per person in the world.

5. Why environmental communication and campaigning?

Our natural inclination in communication seems to be based on the assumption that a lack of knowledge is the main reason for insufficient action. However, empirically based research has shown that this so-called information-deficit model is deeply flawed. So the key in environmental communication is not to simply increase the volume, inundating people with facts, correcting their factual "errors" and misperceptions, but to build communication strategies that integrate factors like values, social norms, identities, emotions, and cognitive patterns.

6. What has your experience been when it comes to transferring scientific insights into practice?

I would like to cite John Sterman of MIT Sloan School of Management to answer this question: "Research shows that showing people research does not work." We should "enable people to express their own views, explore their own proposals and thus learn for themselves what the likely impacts will be."

7. What field of research in the environmental sciences do you find most exciting?

The social sciences are still undervalued when it comes to assessing their contribution to tackling the biodiversity or the climate crisis. This problem is reflected in the communication process of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Its assessment report describing climate solutions and the possible societal responses to the crisis (the report of IPCC Working Group 3) is published several months *after* the world has been shocked and disheartened by the stark descriptions of the natural sciences in the report of Working Group 1. This timing is counterproductive to all we know about motivating solution-oriented communication.

8. Can you name any person or event that has had a particular influence on your commitment to environmental issues?

The prunes and raspberries growing in my parents' garden taught me the beauty and value of nature.

9. What knowledge about the environment would you like to pass on to young people?

Western or so-called modern thinking, the mental framework in which our societies are habitually moving, tends to see the environment as something that is entirely distinct from ourselves, something from which we can easily separate ourselves. I would like to pass on to young people that this thinking might be very liberating, but it comes at a mortal risk. To use a metaphor: we behave like astronauts having left our spaceship to

make a flight-walk in the cosmos. This is all very exciting; triggering euphoria. But cutting the cables that connect us to the spaceship filled with high-tech tools is like cutting the blood vessels connecting us with life, with Mother Nature.

10. As a person concerned with environmental and especially climate communication, what contradictions do you face in everyday life?

Trying to live a life where care for nature, for our common living base is a central value, means a daily life full of contradictions. I think I have a fair understanding of environmentally responsible consumption or mobility options. At the same time, I have to fight my frustration stemming from the fact that very often the environmentally cleaner, healthier and fairer option is still the option that is more expensive, more cumbersome and more uncomfortable. The way out of these contradictions is twofold: first, we need to change the political framework so that people are rewarded, not punished, for behaviour that protects our natural living conditions. Secondly, in the interest of self-care, we need to foster a certain tolerance for contradictions.

11. What are you reading at the moment?

War and Peace by Leo Tolstoj, telling us so much about humans' place in history; *The Ministry for the Future* by Kim Stanley Robinson, brilliantly sketching a future in which humans have understood how to cooperate in an existential crisis; and *Under the Influence: Putting Peer Pressure to Work* by behavioural economist Robert H. Frank, which describes the empirical basis for my hope – that acting for the common good can be contagious.

12. Apart from the ones we've raised here, what is the most important question of our day?

One important question I would like to raise: What can we learn from societies faced with existential threats? Which social or behavioural patterns helped these societies to successfully deal with these threats?



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Staff member of the former German Federal President, Richard von Weizsäcker. Former communications specialist for Transparency International, Verbraucherzentrale Bundesverband, DIW Berlin, European Climate Foundation.

Awards: *Deutscher Umweltmedienpreis* 2017

Memberships: Transparency International Deutschland e.V. (Vice Chair) | Lausitzer Perspektiven e.V. (founding member and long-time Co-Chair)

Selected publications: *Über Klima sprechen – Das Handbuch* (editor, <https://klimakommunikation.klimafakten.de>)

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CAREL CARLOWITZ MOHN ...

... has always taken a keen interest in the power of communication, which is why he turned his passion into his profession and became a journalist. He has always wanted to make sure that the facts are heard, with the aim of changing things for the better. His goal was to shape the world rather than just report about it. In order to achieve this, he continued to adjust his focus over the course of his professional life. He began his career managing communications for various organizations. Then, over time, his focus increasingly shifted to the topics of climate change and sustainability.

After graduating from high school, Carel Mohn began his training at the Deutsche Journalistenschule (German School of Journalism) in Munich in November 1989. To his chagrin, the Berlin native witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall from a distance in Bavaria. Once he had completed his training as a journalist, he returned to his native Berlin, where he studied political sciences.

In 2011, Carel seized the opportunity to set up the *klimafakten.de* online platform for climate communication. His fascination with all living things, great respect for all creatures and admiration for the natural world had first arisen during his childhood in his parents' garden. He retained this romantic view of the environment and began developing a growing expertise in the field.

Carel's focus shifted to communication approaches that motivate action.

It was also during this time that he decided to add the suffix "Carlowitz" to his civil name, as a tribute to the chief miner from Freiberg in Saxony, Hans Carl von Carlowitz, who first coined the principle of sustainability in 1713. Carel is not concerned whether people should find this move somewhat vain or bizarre. What matters to him is the message that great things can be set in motion through new conceptual approaches.

The *klimafakten.de* project began, as he himself explains, with a rather naive view of communication. The name says it all! After the failure of the *World Climate Conference* in Copenhagen in 2009, the goal was to use facts, so to speak, as a firewall against climate change deniers. The platform concentrates on publishing smart posts and appealing explanatory pieces. However, ignorance and inaction from large sections of the world – in politics, business and society – continue to persist. What is wrong here? Social science research eventually taught Carel how the human psyche deceives itself in order to ignore or push aside facts that are inconceivable or overwhelming, and do not fit one's world view.

From that time on Carel's focus shifted to communication approaches that promote acceptance, improve understanding and motivate action. This was also the starting point for the *K3* conferences. Together with Deutsches Klima-Konsortium and other partner organizations from Austria and Switzerland, *klimafakten.de* created a science and practice platform in 2017, with the goal of exchanging ideas on climate communication at the meta-level. The *Handbook for Climate Communication* and communication training classes were the next steps in bringing the findings of social science research into practice. What will be next? We'll have to wait and see.

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