

AMERICA

THE POSSIBLE



A CONVERSATION WITH CONSERVATIONIST

GUS SPETH

SATURDAY, MARCH 4 AT 2 P.M.
MAIN LIBRARY AUDITORIUM
68 CALHOUN ST. CHARLESTON 29401



JAMES GUSTAVE "GUS" SPETH is the former dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, founder and president of the World Resources Institute, chair of the U.N. Development Group, professor of law at Georgetown University, and chair of the U.S. Council on Environmental Quality in the Carter administration. He is most recently the author of *Angels by the River*, a memoir about growing up in Orangeburg, SC.

Gus will be in conversation with **ALBERT GEORGE II**, the first Director of Conservation for the South Carolina Aquarium and the Co-Founder of the Amazon Reforestation Project. Mr. George has a B.S. in Marine Biology and Chemistry from Savannah State University and a Master's of Science from the Georgia Institute of Technology.



A PUBLIC Q&A AND BOOK SIGNING WILL FOLLOW.
BOOKS WILL ALSO BE AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE.

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68 CALHOUN ST.
29401

Observer: Kirsten Abrahamson

Note: The League of Women Voters - Charleston Area neither supports nor endorses political candidates or political parties. It is committed to civic awareness and education and will advocate for carefully selected and studied issues.

Through its Observer Corps, the League collects and provides reports covering a wide range of government and community organizations as a service to its members and the public. The League neither endorses nor sanctions the organization(s) sponsoring the meetings nor the views of those speaking or attending. Rather, the League seeks to provide fair-minded fact-based summaries in support of expanding public knowledge and awareness, and civil discourse.

The views of the featured speakers (Mr. Speth and Mr. George represent their views. Meeting notes begin 30 minutes into the program.

Meeting Update:

Gus Speth (see biography above) spoke about the state of environmental concerns in the current political climate. The presentation then turned to a discussion with Al George (see biography above) followed by Questions & Answers with the audience.

Mr. Speth addressed what he sees as the concern with the appointment of Scott Pruitt as new head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

He outlined three courses of action he believes needed to address environmental issues in the United States with the current administration and the worldwide impact.

1. Broaden the Environmental Agenda
 - a. Environmental issues are anything and everything that impacts the environment
2. Get politically involved and inclusive
 - a. Energize at the grassroots level
 - b. Engage at every level – local, county, state and federal
 - c. Historically the environmental movement has been dominated by lawyers and scientists and the movement needs preachers, poets, sociologists, psychologists, etc..
 - d. Collaborate with other organizations for common ground
3. Build a movement
 - a. Learn from the Black Lives Matter group, the Women’s March group, etc.
 - b. The Climate March in NYC was a positive effort with many diverse groups represented

Mr. Speth has written a book called *Black and Green* in which he compares the environmental movement with the civil rights movement. He thinks the environmental movement did many things right in the legal arena but they missed the “lunch counter” activism established by the civil rights movement. He has been re-reading Martin Luther King and admiring Dr. King’s critique of existing institutions, the US Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measure, and corporate power. He feels that the environmental group isolated themselves within the District of Columbia beltway and didn’t pick up the activist component so successfully represented by the civil rights movement.

Regarding sea level rise in Charleston, there were 2 days of flooding without rain in a previous year. Last year, there were 35 days of flooding without rain. Mr. Speth asks how do concerned citizens get people to understand that there is a 6 to 8 foot rise predicted in the next 80 years? This communication requires local leadership. The term "climate change" has been a negative buzzword in recent years but he thinks this is changing. It is becoming undeniable that change is happening. He said there is really good science on sea level rise and the current data shows that the Charleston area will be greatly impacted but the mid-Atlantic area will be hit even harder.

He raised the question of "How do we adapt?" He recommends that rather than focusing on emissions, there is a need to focus on a discovery of adaptation to current conditions and the difficulty of this adaptation will lead to awareness.

Some recent action has been taken by former Mayor Riley and Mayor Tecklenburg.

Al George referenced and applauded the ***League of Women Voters of Charleston's*** program and panel discussion on rising sea levels and the impact on the lowcountry. He advocated for the need for community knowledge and the need to reach out to all economic communities citing that the Gullah/Geechee community will be one of the first affected in this area. The poor and marginalized are often hit the hardest by environmental changes and disasters in the U.S. and in developing countries. Some communities have leadership who have united in a commitment to zero net emissions. This may mean less "growth mania". He stated Charleston needs a growth plan. He stated he believes at the county and city level, there was once leadership from Lindsey Graham but now he is "distracted and not focused on climate". There are powerful congressional leaders in Rep. Clyburn. Modest efforts have been made. Obama made small progress at end of term but Mr. George believes much is in jeopardy with current administration. Many offices in place since the 1960's are in peril.

Mr. George went on to state that the country demographics are changing towards a majority minority. The geosciences are underrepresented by those who make up the majority minority. Without diversity in the voices speaking to environmental issues, there remains a gap in communication across economic and cultural lines.

Gus Speth stated he heard at a conference 10 years ago that environmental information was not easily understood so he created an organization called *Climate Central* to connect knowledge, action and outreach.

Mr. Speth said the public must be vigilant about mis-information and dis-information. He believes there must be push back. After many years, the U.S Attorney's investigations of Exxon are leading to lawsuits in certain states including New York.

Even before the climate change issue existed, an already complex worldwide limited care capacity issue existed due to exploding populations, food consumption challenges, etc. These issues also have an environmental component.

Q: In the 1800's, dams were built across the country to support manufacturing. In some areas, these dams have been removed improving the quality of those communities. Why can't this happen more often?

A: *Mr. George responded: The environmental and land management impact of those decisions was not fully understood at the time of the dam implementation. This is best represented in Louisiana where the dykes to control watershed have altered the silt that created natural landfills.*

The state is losing a football field of land per hour. New Orleans was never meant to be on the water. There are areas that are discovering that by removing these manmade impediments, there can be improved watershed management and a better ecological balance.

Q: What is the UN's role? Population growth? Sustainable growth?

A: *Mr. Speth responded: "I am very worried about the UN leadership with the current administration. The UN has a large apparatus for dealing with these issues but they need resources. They have been clumsy in the past but they need our support. We didn't pay our UN dues for many years but after 9/11, the U.S. realized that they were going to need the UN's help and paid the back dues. The UN has never fully funded programs on empowering women, education of girls, non-coercive family services and is further threatened by the revival of the Mexico City policy."*

Q: Pollutants coming from China and entering U.S. is not scientifically verified. What do we do about this?

A: *Mr. Speth responded: "We need to take responsibility for some of the brown haze of Asia. We are cleaner in the U.S. because we have off-shored our manufacturing to Asia including massive carbon emissions. Asia is the highest carbon emissions producer annually."*

Mr. George responded: All world activities matter to all. The rain forest functions as the lungs of the earth. Water is continually recycled and we consume water that a T-Rex consumed. The ocean currents combined with the atmospheric paths create global weather impacting water and air quality. "We need to own pollution principals and own the creation of the disposable world that we have exported worldwide along with its plastic production in Asia." How do we as individuals own our environmental responsibility?

Q: There has been increased activism across many issues. How do we communicate without competing with others?

A: *Mr. Speth responded: "The Climate March was a good start where he saw socialists gathered wearing brown, communists marching in red and anarchists who were being flanked by concerned police. All united."*

Q: How do we reach across the aisle?

A: *Mr. Speth state that there is a wealthy businessman who has created a website on climate change. Bob Inglis, former Republican Congressman from SC, who has had a change of heart, is supporting a climate tax. Republicans in a newly formed Climate Leadership Council including Paulson and Shultz are proposing a climate tax bill.*

It will soon become apparent that climate denial is unsustainable but he is worried that it will take too long. Exxon has admitted that climate change exists. It has long been a wedge issue that created a base for the Republican Party.

Q: There has been a deliberate effort in the past 25 years to education both adults and children in environmental issues. The schools have become more literate and often the children are smarter than their parents. However, the real problems seem to revolve around greed, selfishness and apathy. How do we address those concerns in an environmental curriculum?

A: *Mr. Speth responded: It is easier at a college level because cultural value change can be part of the conversation. "We need to bring the "future" into the "present" – this can change values. We don't do enough envisioning of alternate futures or next-system prospect alternatives." One suggestion is to create an essay contest where youth envision a new future under different environmental conditions.*

Mr. George responded: Tell young people the truth. Values are caught, not taught. Kids are looking at what we are doing. We need to pass the torch and let kids know that they are responsible. They own the future.

Gullah/Geechee people feel disconnected. The SC Aquarium has a program called Resilience Initiative for Coastal Education (RICE). 80% of African Americans can tie their U.S. entry to Charleston. Many Africans were not brought here just for their brawn but for their range of skills. West Africans who worked with the Dutch in their country brought hydrology engineering to the lowcountry. The African American community can connect to a range of genetic expertise over the 3-400 years that helped build our country. To educate, we need to create a scaffold, a connection via science, grandchildren or cultural heritage.

Q: Can you address the local environmental justice issue?

A: *Mr. George responded: Omar Muhammad who has worked in water and soil quality in SC, found toxic soil during an effort to create community gardens. He needs more support. Flooding is a serious local issue. The Gullah/Geechee community has built up suspicion of exploitation. Their trust needs to be gained. The conversation has to be about creating a path not one that is dictatorial.*

Q: There has been an increase in population growth of 67% worldwide and 50% of that growth is in cities. Is this good or bad?

A: *Mr. Speth responded: Both. But where there is concentration, parks and natural areas need to be created.*

Q: There are broader movements that can help usher the environmental movement along but there is concern that groups cannot join forces due to an ideological difference such as pro-life vs. pro-choice. How is this overcome? As a Libertarian, the questioner has a clear vision on how the environmental issues could be resolved without increased regulation. Would anyone listen to him?

A: *Mr. Speth responded: He would be interested in seeing the plan.*

Q: How to address the urgency?

A: *Mr. Speth responded: He has worked for so long with so little changes, he thinks change is going to be crisis driven. He is part of group that has proposed a completely outrageous idea involving buying out fossil fuel giants to keep 80% of fossil fuels in the ground.*

Mr. George responded: He is focused on home. 1 foot of sea level rise has occurred in the Charleston harbor over the past 10 years. "We need to win the coffee table discussion. All are impacted."

Q: How to address diversity in organizations that have primarily a white middle class base? In working with Non-Government Organizations (NGO's) worldwide, reaching across cultural barriers requires greater levels of connection. He thinks spirituality is needed in the conversation.

A: *Agreed with creating more diverse connections and conversations.*

Q: *Why don't we choose to divest of Wall Street companies? Like Oprah, why don't we choose not to eat meat if animal agriculture is responsible for 50 % of emissions? Why don't we boycott Walmart? Why don't we choose a week to not drive a car? Is there a fear by leaders in directing radical ideas?*

A: *Gus responded: He likes these ideas and said that many ideas like these are nibbling around. Universities are getting away from fossil fuel investments.*