



Dr. Kristian Parker

OAK FOUNDATION

Kristian is the Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees for the Oak Foundation, based in Switzerland. He oversees Oak's Environment Programme. He is a marine biologist and received his Ph.D. in environmental sciences from Duke University. Kristian is a founding board member of Oceans 5 and a member of the Board of Oceana and the ClimateWorks Foundation.

Kristian was originally interviewed three years ago for EFN's publication A Splendid Torch. We interviewed him again in late 2016 to see how his giving and views on philanthropy had changed in this time.

Q: What, if anything, has changed in your giving over the last three years?

A: The biggest thing is not so much with my giving but with my time. I see the need to focus on climate change. We have had some significant victories recently. With the Paris Agreement and renewable energies moving faster than anyone ever expected, there has been a lot of progress. But if the two things I have are time and money, then I'm starting to steer more of my time towards reaching other people to convince them that climate change is an issue that is receiving too little attention, given the scale of what will happen if we don't deal with it. We are on track for maybe three degrees Celsius [of global average temperature rises] at the moment, and that is a frightening scenario: two degrees is already pushing the limits. We need to get below that and we're simply not on track. The good news is that we have had a lot of success and philanthropy has had a lot of success. So, I just want to tell that story and encourage others to engage.

Q: Tell us a bit more about exactly what you are doing in that arena.

A: With four other foundations, we have an effort that we are calling 'Go Big' to reach out to existing and potential philanthropists around the world and talk to them about climate change – why we see it as important and how it might affect the work that they are already doing. In our conversations, we help them think about how they might invest in climate change mitigation.

It's a peer-to-peer type effort. If they are interested in investing in climate change, then we will provide them with the opportunities – and there are many of them! The reason I'm doing this is simply that we always talk about strategic philanthropy, but we've got to the point where most of the biggest climate funders sit around the table and say, 'Well, being strategic isn't our problem; the problem is not having enough funds available to invest

in all the ideas out there, and in all the opportunities.’ So being strategic now is going out and talking to other people, encouraging them to give, not so much deciding ‘do I give to NGO A or NGO B?’.

We want to meet people where they are: if they are health funders, then let’s work on air quality; if they work on poverty, let’s work on energy efficiency. It’s not so much about bringing them to our issue but finding ways to work together that bring about the co-benefits of addressing air quality, energy efficiency or food waste, for example.

Q: Are you spending most of your time and funding on climate change now, or are you still working on some other areas?

A: Our Environment Programme still works on the oceans and they are still my passion. But with things like ocean acidification and warming [brought about by climate change], we’re on track to lose coral reefs. My team are still investing in NGOs working on the oceans, but the reality is that if we can’t stop climate change then that work will be lost. About half of our Environment Programme budget goes towards climate, sometimes maybe a little bit more than half.

Q: Can you tell us about a success story you have been involved in over the last three years?

A: This may seem like a sales pitch for offering organisations core [i.e., not project-based] support. Through the ClimateWorks Foundation, we invested in an organisation called the International Council on Clean Transportation. They play a role as a think tank, highlighting best practice regarding fuel efficiency in cars, and they also play a watchdog role on air quality. It started with a conversation between them and a few other NGOs about whether diesel cars were actually meeting the air quality standards. They then commissioned research from a university – and that’s how ‘Dieselgate’ came out.

Now, that victory was accidental, nobody was really looking for this. They knew there was an issue with how the rules were being enforced, but had no idea that behind this was active cheating. It just shows the value of having these civil society organisations watching out for the proper enforcement of regulations. We had given them core support – without which they might not have been able to do this work.

Out of the scandal has come an opportunity for electrification of transportation – air quality in London is a prime example; it’s simply not up to European standards. Those standards are based on what’s needed to maintain people’s health, not some arbitrary number. The levels of pollutants in the city are just not what people should be exposed to.

Q: Do you prefer to provide core funding?

A: We do. We tend to give it to a sub-set of our partners and it depends where they are in their development. But we provide a fair amount of core funding across our programme areas, because we believe that it is one of the most constructive ways of building capacity. It’s hard work to raise money and it’s hard work to raise core costs especially. More funders need to do this; we don’t need to torture NGOs into having to come up with the new ideas. Sometimes you’re investing in people, in a concept, in the people that are running it and the potential for change, not necessarily a specific outcome.

Q: What do you think have been the most significant changes to the environment sector as a whole in the last three years?

A: Last time you interviewed me I spoke about how I didn’t view climate change as an environmental issue but as a human issue, and that is even more the case now. It’s the disadvantaged people in the developing world that are going to be hit the hardest by climate change. Not us, them. You know, heatwaves or a change in rainfall

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patterns directly affect food production – all of these things are going to hit the poorest people the hardest.

I think part of my evolution as a philanthropist has been about not always focusing on the goal. The big example I’ll give is the evolution of what used to be our marine protection areas programme into a small-scale fisheries programme. So instead of focusing on the objective of protected areas, we turned it on its head and focused on small-scale fishermen. It’s now a brand new programme, and the strategy is still in development, but the framework is completely different. It’s no longer focused on protected areas, instead it’s focused on how we can help small-scale fishermen become sustainable. In that context it’s become a human issue also. If you add climate change into that picture, helping to form resilience in both the ecosystem and the communities becomes a form of investment in people’s livelihoods and in their ability to access cheap protein.

There are a lot more people working as small-scale fishermen in the world than as industrial fishermen. They use a lot less fuel; they receive far less in terms of subsidies and together they catch almost as much fish. That doesn’t mean they don’t have any impact on the environment, but they do tend to do less damage to the environment than industrial fishing does. For us to protect the oceans through

small-scale fishermen – it’s not going to be easy, but I think its going to be a change in the way we look at a problem. So, instead of looking at how to protect an area and keep fishermen out, we are asking, ‘How do you keep a system that benefits both the environment and the fisherman?’. Small-scale fishermen are a natural ally in a sense.

Q: What advice would you give to new funders interested in supporting environmental work?

A: I would encourage people to get to a place where they trust organisations with core grants because they are the most valuable form of support. Given to some key partners it can really open them up to huge opportunities. You don’t have to do it forever but I really encourage people to work out what it is they would need in order to be able to feel comfortable giving core support grants. Because, as a funder, ultimately you can have a strategy and you can have people working to help you find the big projects, but the people doing the work have pretty good ideas too. Sometimes simply supporting those ideas is the most effective way to act – not second-guessing them so much.

I would also reiterate the risk of *not* doing something on climate change. You can argue that \$1 spent today is worth \$10 spent in ten years. There is a lot of momentum now, and this is a perfect time to come in. A lot of the scepticism

over technologies like renewable energy and solar energy has been wiped out. Solar energy is cheaper than coal in some places and it's only going to get cheaper, for instance. So, this is a great time to start supporting climate change work and it's also a great time to get more for your money – because in ten years' time if we are headed towards three degrees [of temperature change], then unfortunately all the money in the world is not going to stop it.

We have got to reduce our emissions to a level we can adapt to. I don't know if it's possible for a lot of people to adapt to a temperature change of three degrees, especially those

poorest people who are already struggling to survive. If you add heat waves, lower crop yields, changes in rainfall patterns, diseases that weren't there before, pests that weren't there before, we simply won't be able to handle the consequences.

I spoke about risk the last time you interviewed me. I think now the risk is not 'investing and failing' or 'investing and not getting what you want'. The risk is not investing, right? We need new people coming in with good ideas and passion. It's not only the money we want, it's the passion and the intelligence and the drive to invest in the next big idea.

