

HOW DID YOU GET THAT  
F\*%ING AWESOME JOB?

HDYGTFAJ?



## A Question for Worldchanger

# Alex Steffen

by Julia Cosgrove

Illustration by Damien Correll

The notion of saving the world is usually the province of superheroes in tights or newly minted college grads. Alex Steffen is neither, but his commitment to bettering the planet is no less noble. As co-founder and executive editor of the online magazine *Worldchanging*, and editor of the best-selling, 596-page, encyclopedic book of the same title, Steffen is leading the charge toward a truly new kind of sustainable existence. We asked him how a child of California hippies grew up to be a pivotal figure in today's green movement.

**READYMADE:** Hi, Alex. How did you get that f\*&%ing awesome job?

**Alex Steffen:** I grew up in northern California, and my folks were hippies. I was literally one of those toddlers who was stomping around to whale songs. After college, I started working as an environmental journalist in Osaka, Japan, in terms of its own environment, has been totally destroyed. It's an incredibly dense place with lots of toxic industry. Being in Asia in the early '90s, it was absolutely impossible to ignore what everyone saw was coming. You could actually see honest-to-goodness rainforest logs coming in on big barges, like toxic clues in the water. It changes the way you see the world. From that point on, I suddenly became aware that the limits that people were talking about in textbooks and news reports weren't abstract things. They were actually happening in the real world, right in front of me.

**RM:** That must have been a fascinating beat to be on.

**AS:** On the one hand, it was really rewarding and cool. I got to go all over the planet and see a lot of interesting places and talk to a lot of smart people. But the more of that I did, the more I realized there were some real limitations in standard environmental journalism. You had to portray a "fair argument" between sides that often didn't actually have a fair argument. If somebody was dumping toxic waste in a schoolyard, you had to find somebody who says that this toxic waste was good for school kids, or necessary for the economy. In short, as Winston Churchill said, you had to be impartial between the fire brigade and the fire.

**RM:** What was your solution?

**AS:** I set up shop as a media consultant. Doing that, I found that almost all of my clients did not have an answer to the question, "What's your win scenario?" If you win, how does the world get better? If you're a water-quality group and you put yourself out of business (like every good nonprofit should be trying to do), what does the world look like? It became very apparent to me that most of the people I was talking with had never even considered the idea that victory was possible. So together with a guy named Jamais Cascio, I started the site *Worldchanging* as a place to blog these ideas. It got out of hand almost immediately, and now we have roughly 8,000 articles on the site.

**RM:** Is today's green movement different from earlier environmental movements?

**AS:** To be blunt, we're closer to the endgame. The only people [today] who are arguing against the problem are people who are being paid to do so or are just professional crazies. We have hard deadlines ahead of us. We have to actually reduce our materials and energy use by 80 to 95 percent in the next 20 years. There's also the reality that things are going to start getting crazier every year. This year, we essentially saw the melting of arctic ice cap that people were expecting in fifty years. We're starting to see really freak events happen, and every one of those converts a few more people.

**RM:** Is there anything to be hopeful about?

**AS:** I'm really excited about a movement that doesn't have a name yet. I see a common cause out there. There's this culture-wide movement amongst smart, usually younger people to know what's behind the

### VITAL STATS

OCCUPATION	Environmental journalist and consultant
LOCATION	Seattle, Washington
AGE	40
FIRST JOB	Environmental reporter for the <i>Japan Times</i> newspaper in Osaka
BEST JOB	Being executive editor of <i>Worldchanging</i>
GREATEST PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGE	A combination of perfectionism, massive disorganization, and complete information overload
SALARY DURING 20S	A high of about \$70,000 in Japan to a low of \$14,500 as a freelance writer

systems that you're dealing with. It includes anything from the whole new crafting-DIY aesthetic to people who are messing around with their local food supply and starting local farmers' market and CSAs; people doing biodiesel cooperatives or sustainable design. This movement of people is defying the fundamental expectation that marketers place on Americans.

**RM:** What would you say to someone who is inspired by your story?

**AS:** We're at a moment where it's neither smart nor fun to trust other people with saving the world. When you make a conscious choice—as millions of people are starting to—to become the kind of person who is going to redefine the world around them to make it more sustainable, more just, and more beautiful, it actually changes the way you see the world. It lifts that burden of despair. It makes you somebody who's part of building the future, rather than somebody whom the future is bearing down upon. If I can recommend to people to do one thing, it would be to simply become one of those people. 