

A conversation with Joshua Reichert on September 24, 2013

Participants

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Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Joshua Reichert.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Joshua Reichert to learn more about the environmental work done by The Pew Charitable Trusts. Conversation topics included: how Pew selects its campaigns, current and past campaigns, and the evolution of Pew's work on climate change.

Overview of the organization

In 2004, Pew changed its legal status from a foundation to a public charity in order to increase its operational effectiveness, including the ability to engage in legislative advocacy. Both foundations and public charities can fundraise and operate programs directly, but only public charities can lobby. Currently, Pew has approximately 1,000 staff and consultants whose work ranges from advocacy to research.

Environmental work

Pew's environmental arm has 275 staff and consultants working on four continents and in fifteen countries, with offices in various cities, including Washington D.C., Portland, Seattle, London, Paris, Brussels, and Sydney. For the past two decades, Pew has focused on three specific issues: clean energy; wilderness preservation; and the protection of life in the sea, with an emphasis on fisheries. The organization's marine-related work represents the most extensive part of this portfolio. With 150 staff and consultants, Pew's oceans group is one of, if not the largest, group of professional ocean advocates in the world.

Pew's environmental arm is a non-partisan, science-based policy group that works to strengthen environmental laws and regulations primarily at the federal and international levels of government. Their staff is made up of technical experts, scientists, communications personnel and professional advocates with deep experience operating in the policy arena. In the U.S., Pew prides itself on being able to work with both Democrats and Republicans and much of its work is bipartisan in nature or crosses conventional liberal and conservative divides. Finally, Pew is a campaign organization that is dedicated to achieving results that are clear and measurable. Pew's campaigns are led by small teams of between four to six people, hired to attain a specific goal rather than to work on a generic set of environmental issues.

Organizational values

Pew generally concentrates on big problems. While the organization is willing to take significant risks, it is also highly methodical and pragmatic in the way it approaches its work. It rarely takes on challenges unless it determines that there is at least a 50% chance of success. Pew operates much like a business and is prepared to cancel or make major adjustments to campaigns if continued investment does not seem justified. That said, there are very few campaigns from which Pew has walked away. Unlike most conservation organizations, which invest in many different issues, Pew's environment work consistently addresses three major problems in which the organization has developed significant expertise, both technical and political. Pew strongly believes that an organization is more likely to be effective if it has a deep understanding of the social and political landscape in which it operates and occupies a specific niche that maximizes its potential to effect change. This has been Pew's philosophy for decades.

Partnerships

Building coalitions

Pew partners with others to achieve common goals, often putting together and leading coalitions of organizations that work together. Pew is structured precisely to play that role, with campaign teams that stay focused until an objective is completed. Based on many years of experience, Pew believes that in order to be successful, coalitions need to be centrally managed by a small, full time staff of professional advocates that are capable of exerting leadership in ways that maximize the impact of both money and people. When leading coalitions, Pew acts as a central repository for funding. With the exception of special programs which Pew manages on behalf of other donors that carry their names, Pew does not ask other organizations to invest in projects that it does not invest in itself.

Financial partners

Many donors are attracted to the notion of pooling funds to achieve conservation outcomes that no single organization can accomplish on its own. In fact, Pew championed this model with its Global Ocean Legacy program, a partnership between seven foundations whose goal is to create the world's first generation of great marine parks. This kind of arrangement typically offers leverage opportunities that enable donors to obtain matches of five dollars or more for every dollar invested with Pew.

Technical partners

Though Pew has a small ocean science division, most of its scientific work is conducted in partnership with respected researchers around the world. Pew sometimes works with nonprofits that have a specific technical skill or constituent base to help secure an important campaign objective.

Project selection

Pew looks for tractable problems for which it is well positioned to add value and amplify efforts that are being applied to achieve large-scale results. Pew can spend a year or more looking at a potential opportunity before deciding to get involved. For example, on three or four occasions, Pew has sought to identify opportunities to create large wilderness reserves, both on land and in the sea, which will stand the test of time. As part of this process, Pew has sent teams to look at potential sites and has conducted extensive political assessments to determine the feasibility of establishing new protected areas that will endure.

Current project on governance for the high seas

There is currently no effective governing mechanism for the world's high seas, which is the area of the ocean that lies beyond the 200-mile exclusive economic zone that is under the control of an individual country. These waters represent 42% of the earth's surface and constitute the largest remaining piece of the global commons other than the atmosphere. Many coastal nations exploit the high seas for fish and other resources, none assume responsibility for its protection, which is an increasing problem as it impedes the sustainable management of such a large and important part of the Earth.

In early 2013, Pew launched the Global Ocean Commission, in partnership with several other foundations and Somerville College at the University of Oxford. The Commission's goal is to issue a series of recommendations regarding the design and implementation of a governance, monitoring and enforcement system for the high seas. The commission is composed of 17 prominent international figures, including three co-chairs: David Miliband, former foreign secretary of the UK, José Maria Figueres, former president of Costa Rica, and Trevor Manuel, minister in the Presidency of South Africa. It has a full-time staff with expertise in marine policy and communications and is expected to issue a final report in late spring 2014.

Major successes

Sustainable fishing

Roughly a decade ago, the Pew Oceans Commission, led by Leon Panetta, issued a series of recommendations on how the U.S. could better protect its ocean resources. Based on the commission's findings, Pew chose to move forward with several priorities that it considered to be the most important. Chief among them was an amendment to the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the nation's principal fishing law, which prevented the federal government from allowing overfishing to take place in federal waters past a specified date. The project took six years of intense work and was very successful. By the end of 2012, all managed U.S. stocks had science-based catch limits in place and the number of fisheries subject to overfishing was (and continues to be) in decline. Pew recently finished a similar project in the European Union, which resulted in a major reform of the EU's common fisheries policy.

The “roadless rule”

During the Clinton Administration, Pew led a coalition that successfully advocated for a new conservation regulation that would permanently protect roughly 58 million acres of remaining, undeveloped national forests in the U.S. This represents one of the largest swaths of wildlands ever protected. The policy, also called “the roadless rule”, prohibits road-building in protected areas, which effectively prohibits major extractive activities in those areas as well. The roadless rule survived various court challenges and is now considered to be the law of the land and a major conservation achievement.

Marine parks

In 2006, Pew decided to create the first generation of the world’s great marine parks with a goal of creating fifteen by 2022, each of which was at least 200 km² in size. Pew’s Global Ocean Legacy program is designed to convince governments of the numerous benefits of creating the equivalent of land based parks in the sea, areas that are protected from all extractive activities including fishing, mining, and extraction of oil and gas. To date, Pew has played an instrumental role in the creation of four marine parks. These include the northwest Hawaiian Islands, the Northern Mariana Islands, the Chagos archipelago in the Indian Ocean, and the Coral Sea in Australia. Pew plans to work to create five additional marine parks over the next five years. Pew’s efforts have helped double the area of comprehensively protected ocean worldwide.

In each of the above cases, Pew worked with partners that played different roles, depending on the campaign. For example, Pew built a coalition of highly respected British institutions. Their engagement was critically important to the final decision made by the British Government to create the Chagos marine park, a magnificent chain of atolls and reefs in the middle of the Indian Ocean which contains large populations of sea birds along with many other species.

Canceled campaign

Pew sought to get the U.S. to ratify the Law of the Sea Treaty, an international treaty negotiated in the 1970s and 1980s and ratified by the vast majority of the world’s nations, but not the United States. To do this, Pew built a campaign team and assembled prominent Democrats and Republicans, including former secretaries of state, secretaries of defense and heads of the National Security Council. While the Pew staff recognized that ratification was by no means assured, they decided that there was a reasonable opportunity to obtain passage in the last Congress. After devoting a year on this campaign, Pew determined that the block of Senators assembled to oppose ratification could not be reduced by enough votes to succeed. When the situation changes, and Pew believes it will, there is a possibility that it will return to try again.

Evolution of Pew's work on climate change

In 1990, Dr. Reichert issued a white paper that outlined a portfolio of environmental work for Pew to adopt and carry out during the next ten years. The paper laid out a set of goals, and a strategy to achieve them over this period, one of which was the establishment of demand side management programs for electric utilities. Instead of simply rewarding utilities for the amount of electricity they generate, these programs reward them for the amount of electricity they saved. The next year, Pew began working on energy and climate issues.

Electric utilities

As its first major project, Pew and its partners helped establish a new system of incentives to encourage electric utility companies to conserve energy. Pew convinced utility commissions to allow utilities to raise their per hour kilowatt rates in return for retrofitting homes to make them more energy efficient, which in turn helped to bring down monthly electric bills. The end result of these initiatives, often referred to as demand side management programs, represented a “win-win” situation for everyone—utilities profited, customer bills went down and huge amounts of energy were saved.

Cap-and-trade policy

In the early 2000s, Pew played a major role in promoting cap-and-trade policies that would reduce carbon dioxide emissions. The effort failed at the legislative level. Pew expects that the use of carbon taxes to address climate change could eventually become more politically viable than they are now.

The Pew Center on Global Climate Change

The Pew Center on Global Climate Change was created to do work that Pew could not do as a foundation. When Pew transitioned to a public charity, the Center decided to remain an independent organization, rather than to be incorporated into the Trusts.

Clean Energy Program

Pew's in-house clean energy program is led by Phyllis Cuttino and has advanced a series of strategies designed to reduce consumption and promote renewable energy. These include:

- Increasing automotive fuel efficiency standards. Pew drove a successful campaign to significantly increase fuel efficiency standards to 52.6 miles per gallon by 2025; and
- Promoting legislation that would provide tax subsidies to manufacturers that retrofit their plants to reduce energy expended on heating and cooling. Similar programs have been highly successful in the past, such as those involving residential housing in the 1990s, but programs involving commercial spaces have yet to be done.

A major focus of Pew's work is also to encourage the use of renewable energy. In the last five to six years, Pew has realized that the public is more responsive to arguments that appeal to the near-term benefits of renewables, such as job creation and stronger national security, rather than the long-term environmental benefits. For example, Pew is working with the Department of Defense to deploy renewable energy and has engaged former Senator John Warner, who chaired the Senate Armed Services Committee, to educate policy makers and the public about the important technology the department has developed to reduce energy consumption, such as increased battery capacity and solar panels that can be used in warfare.

Mainstream economists agree that renewables will be a major area of growth in the next century. China and Germany, for example, are already heavily invested in renewables, according to an annual study that Pew produces with Bloomberg New Energy Finance. Unfortunately, the U.S. lags behind other countries in the development of a national energy policy that would incentivize the private sector to invest in renewables. Pew is working to change that equation.

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