

Timothy DeChristopher
Activist

Interviewer-John Howe

Tim, let's start out by talking just a little bit about wilderness. Why do you think it's important? Why should we care about wilderness?

Timothy DeChristopher

I think wilderness is important because it kind of gives us a balance and puts us in a more human perspective. When we're in a city or indoors, we kind of think of ourselves as being very big. We're taking up a lot of space and we're really large in relation to this room, and so we get into this mindset that every little thing that happens to us is extremely important and everything's a really big deal, but when we're out, out in the desert, or out on a mountain, and we look out at these big, vast openings, I think it really puts us in the proper scale of realizing how big the world is and how a lot of these little things in our day-to-day life aren't really that big, and I think it helps us to deal with the world a lot better to have that perspective.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me what you had in mind when you bid on the oil and gas leases. Just tell me what you had in mind that day, and how the process of that day went.

Timothy DeChristopher

I saw the oil and gas leases as kind of a confluence of several different issues, and the one that's gotten the most media attention is the exploitation of our wilderness and the exploitation of public lands, but I also saw it as a big example of the loss of our participatory democracy and people being locked out of the decision-making process of our own property, of our public property, and the big issue of climate change, that this was a big example of the drill-now-think-later mentality that really threatens our future. So I was motivated by all of those issues, and, I first went into that auction just trying to cause any kind of disruption that I could, to stand in the way of it and expose how unjust it was, and I thought maybe that would be making a speech, or standing up and yelling something, or throwing a shoe, and it wasn't until I got in there and they asked me if I wanted to be a bidder that I saw the opportunity to have that big of an impact. And when I started bidding, I had just been watching this auction for a while, these parcels of wilderness going for ten dollars an acre, two dollars an acre, fifteen dollars an acre, and it just got down to one person of "Going once, going twice," at, like, twelve dollars an acre, and I just had to raise my hand, as if to say, "That's not enough. They're worth a lot more than that."

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me a little bit about energy development in the West. What do you feel is appropriate? Is there a place for energy in the West? And, what do you think should happen?

Timothy DeChristopher

Well, there's absolutely a place for energy in the West. We've got some of the best resources in the country for solar, wind and geothermal power, and we have a huge potential for that, not only to meet all of the energy needs of Utah, but to be exporting energy as well to the rest of the

country. We have a huge potential for that and I think that's where the potential for rural economic development and rural jobs really lies in the state of Utah is with our huge potential for renewable energy. And, that's the kind of energy that doesn't need as much water. Both coal-fired power plants, most of our drilling that we do for oil and natural gas, where they use huge amounts of water for the fracturing process, nuclear power, oil shale development, they all require huge amounts of water, vast amounts, and that's something that we simply don't have in the West to spare. So I think we're going to get to a point, fairly soon, where that type of water-intensive energy development is going to become not realistic at all and people are going to be racing away from that because water is such a precious resource here.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me a little bit about your meeting at Senator Hatch's office. How did that go? What were you hoping to accomplish?

Timothy DeChristopher

We were at Senator Hatch's office in Washington D.C. and we had brought about thirty students from the University of Utah, Westminster College, BYU, UVU, and Weber State, so we had a wide representation there and then just a few other community members from Utah, so I think we had about thirty-five people in his office. It was packed and standing room only and his policy director was there talking to us. We were all there to talk about the issue of climate change and how serious of a concern that is to us, and the policy director made it clear that Orrin Hatch doesn't believe in man-made climate change, that he has looked at the ninety-seven percent of scientists who say that this is a real threat and something that we need to do something about, and the three percent who think that none of this is nothing to worry about, and he's decided to side with those three percent of scientists. So, that was pretty disappointing. I think one of the key points of that meeting, for me, was one of the people in our group asked this representative of Orrin Hatch, "You know, even if you don't really believe all those scientists, how can you, morally, take that risk? How can you risk being wrong and threatening all of our future?" And the aide just ignored that question and refused to answer it, and I think that's the point where we're at, where those who try to deny climate change just have no moral ground to stand on whatsoever, and they can't even discuss that part of the issue.

Interviewer-John Howe

Were you surprised that Secretary Salazar's response to your case in that you haven't been prosecuted?

Timothy DeChristopher

Ken Salazar wasn't the one who prosecuted me, and it wasn't the BLM's decision at that point. It was the U.S. Attorney's office, and specifically the U.S. Attorney here in Salt Lake, Brett Tolman, and I didn't necessarily expect that he wouldn't prosecute. You know, I took this action expecting that I would, most likely, go to prison and made the decision beforehand that it was worth it. I did think it was a little odd that after the government officially decided that this auction was illegitimate and they hadn't followed their own rules that they were trying to prosecute me then for trying to stand in the way of something illegal.

Interviewer-John Howe

If you are convicted, what will be your response? How will you feel about that?

Timothy DeChristopher

If I'm convicted I won't necessarily be surprised. I mean, I made the decision going in that this was something worth going to prison for, and I still stand by that, and will accept any consequences that I have to deal with for this, but I think this trial will be kind of a key indicator of where we're really at as a society and whether we're willing to justify the continued exploitation of not only our natural world, but our younger generations, and whether we're willing, as a society, to start standing up against that kind of exploitation.

Interviewer-John Howe

How has the environmental community been, or, has the environmental community been effective in preserving wilderness? And, what do you think should be done?

Timothy DeChristopher

I think the environmental community has been moderately effective at some of the things they're fighting for; including defending wilderness, but it's always a question of how much we're willing to compromise, because the environmental movement has always been defensive. It's always been where someone wants to destroy this much and the environmental community convinces them only to destroy this much. So we're always taking a step back, and the environmental movement has been effective at slowing down how quickly we're moving back, but I think now we're getting to a point where, right behind us, is a cliff, where we don't have much ground to give up anymore, and if we keep getting pushed back, it doesn't matter how slowly we can keep getting pushed back, sooner or later we're going to go over that cliff, and I think that's why we need a major shift in the environmental movement where we're actually moving forward, where we're on the offensive. And I think that's something we haven't seen for a long time.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me where the line is between civil disobedience and protest, and breaking the law.

Timothy DeChristopher

Well, we have the legal right to protest in this country. There have been a lot of laws to restrict how that protest happens and what kind of permission you need to get to protest, and I just heard last week that the Pentagon had officially classified protest as low-level terrorism right now, so that our legal grounds to protest are certainly shrinking, but we still have that right. And I think where it becomes civil disobedience is where we are actually breaking the law to demonstrate that the law is unjust. And that's part of a rich heritage of civil disobedience that we have in this country, and a lot of the moral advancement that we've made has come through civil disobedience and people breaking the law to show how unjust that law is.

Interviewer-John Howe

Do you see a similarity between the Pariah Canyon off-road protest ride and your case? And, what do you think should be done in that case?

Timothy DeChristopher

Well, the folks riding at Pariah Canyon, they called what they were doing civil disobedience, and then I found it very interesting that when law enforcement officials were just taking pictures of them and collecting the evidence, that they were outraged at that and said that they had no right to be doing that, and they didn't seem very willing to accept the consequences of their action. So I think that's kind of where it differed from my case in that I'm, at this point, looking forward to a trial because I think we need to have a trial to expose all the corruption in our system, both the surface level corruption of the BLM in this case, and the rules that they didn't follow, and the deeper injustices in a system that consistently chooses the short-term profits of a few over the lives and well-being of everyone else on the planet. And I think that's what needs to be dealt with and if it means that I need to go to prison or risk imprisonment to do that, then that's simply what has to happen.

Interviewer-John Howe

What kind of say should rural communities have when wilderness is created? Who owns the land in your opinion?

Timothy DeChristopher

Well, with BLM land or National Forest land, or anything like that, it's clear that the public throughout the country owns that land, and I think they should have a say. I think the concerns of the local communities should be taken into account, but the fact is, a lot of those local communities depend on those wilderness areas being kept wild and retaining their beauty. I've been down to Moab several times after the auction and the people there are tremendously supportive of what I did, and they are the ones, they are the local community. They're the ones most impacted, and they want to see that area protected. And even in some of the other areas of the state where conservative politics really dominates and the extractive have the loudest voice, even those communities, like Kanab, way more people are employed by recreation than are employed by extractive industries. And so, there's a lot more people whose economic well-being depends on those lands being kept in a natural state, and I think those voices need to be taken into account. So I think, when we go into a rural community we need to not just listen to the biggest, loudest industry voice there, but really listen to the people that are impacted, and also be looking out for people's long-term concerns. You know, the folks up in Vernal are very upset right now because they've lost so many oil drilling jobs, and that's mainly because the price of oil has crashed, so the oil industry all pulled out and that's the usual boom and bust cycle we see with oil, that they're there one day and everybody's happy and everybody has a job, and then they pull out when the price changes, and they leave that community behind. And so, I think we should be looking for sustainable employment and long-term, stable employment for those rural communities.

Interviewer-John Howe

Some politicians have said that you are misguided and disrespectful. What is your response to them?

Timothy DeChristopher

I'm guided by most of our best scientists who are seeing this threat to our very civilization, and beyond that I'm guided by my sense of responsibility for protecting not only my own future, but the future of other generations. So, if they feel like that is the wrong thing to be guided by facts

and by our ethical responsibility, then that's ultimately an ethical debate I suppose. And, what was the other thing that they said I was-Disrespectful? I've been very clear that nothing that I'm doing is any kind of personal attack against anyone, and I've been conscious throughout this at focusing my efforts on the real issues and on the fundamental problems with this system, and not trying to be disrespectful towards any one actor in that system.

Interviewer-John Howe

Was it worth it? And, would you do it again? And, what have you learned from this process?

Timothy DeChristopher

My action was absolutely worth it and I'd certainly do it again given the opportunity, not that that will happen, but I made the decision before I took action, that it was worth going to prison not only to protect that land, but to keep that oil in the ground and give us a better chance for a livable future. And now that's happened and we've stimulated this much larger discussion about what action we should be taking to protect our survival, and to protect our children. So, it's really turned out better than I could have anticipated, so, I would certainly do it again.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me what you've learned from this process?

Timothy DeChristopher

I've learned that I think the most effective we can be as activists is putting ourselves on the line, and really the most powerful tool that we have is our own willingness to sacrifice, and that's what seems to get through to people on a much more human, and a much deeper level than any of the facts and figures or evidence that we can give to people; that if we really want to create change, and we really want to achieve a better world then the pursuit of justice can never be sacrificed to the pursuit of comfort.

Interviewer-John Howe

What would your response be to politicians that have been critical of your actions? If you actually got a chance to talk with them, what would you say?

Timothy DeChristopher

I think to politicians and others who have been critical of my actions I would say that the reason my actions are necessary is because politicians haven't lived up to their responsibility of defending our future and defending our wilderness. We have this system set up that they can take responsibility for that, and they can take action and, you know, kind of make these smooth transitions, and when they fail to do that, it falls to citizens like me to create that change in any way that we can.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you see for the future of wilderness in the West, and these issues specifically? What do you think is going to happen over the next few years?

Timothy DeChristopher

Honestly, I think that over the next few years, things are probably going to get much uglier

before they get better. I think that the impacts of climate change are going to have a devastating effect on our wilderness and I think that the real impacts of that aren't going to sink in to most of our population until it's too late.

Interviewer-John Howe

For those who would question your motives, tell me why you care. Why are these issues so important to you?

Timothy DeChristopher

I care about this because I see that I'm not just this individual who's completely disconnected from everyone else and everything else in our world. I see that I'm interconnected with other people and with all the rest of the life on our planet, and I can't detach myself from that. So, any kind of sacrifice that I have to make, I see that all the other benefits that other people, and our natural world gain from that, are all benefits for me too because I'm a part of that world.

Interviewer-John Howe

What were you hoping for as a result of what you did? And, were you surprised and disappointed by what actually happened?

Timothy DeChristopher

I was hoping that I could cause enough of a disruption to this process that it would delay it and there was a chance that the land would be protected and the oil would be kept in the ground, and that has been successful. I'd say I'm mixed on whether it's really met my expectations. On the social impacts of this, my expectation at the time was that there would be this small group of people who really appreciated what I did and respected it, and that then there would be others who are inspired to take action on their own, and that those people would start to take more bold action and that that would kind of grow. And, six months after the auction, looking back now, it's had a very different social impact in that there's been really wide and broad support for what I did, and I've gotten praise from this huge group of people, but not many of them have actually been taking action on their own, and it seems odd to me that people could respect and understand what I did and not feel like they need to take action on their own. To me it seems like either I'm crazy, or we should all be in the streets.