



## Think! Care! Act!

Earth Visionary – Bob Phelps

'Think! Care! Act!' - these words at the end of Gene Ethics emails are the motto for Bob Phelps' life. A long-time activist for peace, social justice and the environment, Bob has spent the last 20 years as Director of Gene Ethics, a citizens' campaign working for safe, secure, GM-free foods and environments. In these interview excerpts, Bob describes how the seeds of his care for the environment were first sown, and then grew into the passion that has become his life's work.

**M**y early recollections about our relationship to the earth are about the garden. Our whole yard was a garden to grow vegetables and fruit and raise chickens. I grew up near Wellington, New Zealand. Both my parents were from the country. Dad was a farming lad and Mum grew up in a country town. We lived in the bush till I was six when we moved to Petone and they started the garden. There was always a hole in the yard where the kitchen scraps were put. Gradually the garden rose from all the good stuff that was poured into it.

In those days horse carts delivered the milk and Dad always picked up the horse manure. He had his bucket and spade in the boot of the car and would collect the manure for the garden, much to Mum's embarrassment. I remember Dad once saying good

soil was just so good you could almost eat it. Now I understand that all soil is created by plants and we are symbiotic with them.

Mum had a respect for living things – not to harm them, and to nurture the living world. So that appreciation comes right from my childhood. Like tending those hens, it was always a treat to help collect the eggs and to let the chooks out to forage. You couldn't leave them locked up in their house.

The other major influences in my early life were my parents' poverty during the Great Depression and being born in the shadow of the atom bomb. I learned to be frugal and to hate weapons and war, values that have stayed with me ever since.

At university in the 1960s I became very active in opposing the Vietnam War. I was motivated by

feelings about peace and justice, but also because the American military was pouring huge quantities of chemicals on forests to destroy the environment, as a weapon of war against civilians. I arrived in Australia in 1972. The Whitlam government gave money to environment centres and I was invited to be the first coordinator of the Queensland Conservation Council. I threw myself into work on uranium mining at Mary Kathleen, the Iwasaki resort that would rip up the coast, and helping to save Fraser Island, the biggest sand island in the world.

In October 1974 I fell off a motorbike and broke my hip. When I recovered the following year a few people got together and formed the Campaign Against Nuclear Power, which I worked on for the next five years. It was very much a blend of my interests in the environment, social justice and peace.

Joh Bjelke-Petersen was Queensland premier and our campaign triggered his bans on street marches and public gatherings. Thousands of us were arrested for defying the bans. It was a very demanding time so I went to live in Asia for several years. When I came back I was employed as the anti-uranium mining campaigner for the Australian Conservation Foundation. In 1987 ACF asked me to explore community concerns about genetic manipulation techniques and their products. In January 1988 Midnight Oil donated money for a part-time GM campaign, from royalties on their album 'Species Deceases'. This later became Gene Ethics.

Our focus at Gene Ethics is on the impacts of genetically manipulated food crops, plants, animals and microbes. I soon realised the enormous contribution that seed savers and breeders have made to the development of agriculture, all without reward and free to everybody. We enjoy a fantastic array of foods and fibres through their generosity. Now this legacy is being stolen by patents. Agricultural biodiversity is just as crucial as natural biodiversity. Gene manipulation produces organisms which are not biodiverse at all. Because each variety of GM organism is produced from a single transformed cell, GM industrialises and makes uniform those living things we depend on. Catastrophic collapse is built in.

Our campaign is also about what human beings are doing to the place we live in. Our technological society is so destructive and disregarding of the wisdom of other societies, like traditional Chinese agriculture which was sustainable for thousands of years.

Most people are motivated to care about the future by thinking about their children and grandchildren. Though I never had children, I also care passionately about our society being environmentally friendly, congenial to good communities, socially and ecologically responsible and not destructive.

We owe a responsibility to future generations that our forebears passed down to us - stewardship of the earth. We're responsible as part of the link in the history of humanity to pass on this world in a condition that is as good as if not better than it came down to us. If I had a notion of God or a deity what comes to my mind is the animate world. Like standing under the redwood trees in California in the face of these immense organisms that grew from a tiny seed for hundreds of years. Or whales - they're also awe-inspiring. I find it inexplicable that humans think that they can do better. People in laboratories imagine they can create superior living things. It's just very, very arrogant.

Despite the challenges, I feel destined to keep going with Gene Ethics and I won't give up. I want our society to be different and this is my way of making a contribution. I see most people as being passively techno-optimistic - if you've got a problem a technology will solve it. When we reality-check that assumption, we find that often technologies are a big part of our problems.

My vision of future agriculture is GM-free systems that work in harmony with the soil, vegetation and landscape. Industrial agriculture as we know it now can't continue because synthetic chemicals based on oil will not be available. We urgently need a new farming model so the world can continue to feed itself. The kind of society I'd like to see would provide the basics for every person in the world - to be housed, clothed, fed, educated and healed. I also picture an environment in which we respect and care for the natural world, where we aren't mining everything or chopping down every forest. We're not separate from nature or above nature, we're absolutely interdependent with it. If nature collapses, we will go as extinct as the dodo.

We need a much more profound appreciation of diversity, that all cultures and living beings contribute to each other's survival. Our destruction needs to be replaced by an ethic of nurture, of replenishment, of care and love for the world.

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