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# LIVING THE DREAM



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A recognised authority on climate change, Dr Gabrielle Walker has focused on the environment for more than two decades. But even though she is deeply concerned about global warming, her approach is rather different from that of most of her peers, as Fiona Walsh explains.

**INTERVIEW WITH DR  
GABRIELLE WALKER BY  
FIONA WALSH**

Gabrielle Walker is an internationally recognised expert and author on sustainability and climate change.

Dr Gabrielle Walker is a glass half-full woman. She prefers to focus on opportunities, not simply because she is an optimist by nature, but because she believes this is the best, perhaps the only, way to deliver meaningful progress in the highly charged field of climate change.

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While others in the sector see only problems, Walker sees solutions – and she believes we must reframe the narrative if we are to have any hope of avoiding catastrophe.

“The risk of climate change is real, very real, and it’s getting more and more urgent,” she says. “I certainly don’t want to minimise the enormous scale of the problem, but saying over and over again that the apocalypse is coming just doesn’t do any good. It’s making people afraid, but without giving them any agency – and that’s a recipe for disaster. We have to give people a dream, as well as a nightmare.”

In her view, we need to paint a collective picture of the net-zero-carbon world we are trying to reach and draw up a series of roadmaps for how to get there. There have to be clear roles for everyone, too. These might include how individuals can use their influence to support forward-thinking businesses and politicians, while punishing the laggards; how investors can reposition their portfolios, eliminating climate-related risks in favour of low-carbon investment opportunities; and how

corporations can create new climate-friendly business models and products, with the permission and encouragement of their investors and campaigning non-governmental organisations.

Walker first came to prominence more than a decade ago with the publication of *The Hot Topic: How to Tackle Global Warming and Still Keep the Lights On*.

Written with Sir David King, a former chief scientific advisor to the UK government, the bestselling book set out the science of climate change in an accessible way and was hailed by Al Gore, environmental activist and former US vice president, as “a beacon of clarity”.

That clarity is born of experience. A specialist in sustainability, energy and climate change, Walker works with a wide range of global companies, government ministers, humanitarian leaders and even US military generals, who, she says, caught on to the scale of climate change earlier than many and now see biofuels as a more secure energy supply for their oil-powered fleets and aircraft.

According to Walker, for example, the migration crisis in the US and Europe has its roots in climate change. “From Sudan and Syria to Guatemala, where farmers can’t make a living, drought is the initial cause. Climate change comes first and hardest for the world’s poorest,” she says. “And then it comes for the rest of us.”

Walker has mixed feelings about activist groups, such as the UK’s Extinction Rebellion, which use non-violent resistance to demand action on the crisis. “They have been doing a brilliant job of injecting some urgency into the debate. But the downside for me is that it can perpetuate the ‘saints and sinners’ narrative, the ‘business is bad, nature is good’ approach,” she explains.

This divisive approach can make matters worse. “If the world is to make any real

headway in the battle against climate change, we will all have to work together. We’ll have to collaborate in ways that have never been seen before.” In 2015, for example, when the Italian utility Enel decided to develop a new strategy to move away from burning coal for power, it invited former foe Greenpeace to help. The result was announced by the chief executives of both organisations in an extraordinary – and unprecedented – joint press conference.

*“Temperatures have been wildly disproportionate to what we’ve had before and we’ve never seen hurricanes of this intensity. It’s as though the atmosphere is on steroids.”*

Much has changed in the decade or so since *The Hot Topic* was published. There have been real positives, such as the Paris Agreement in 2015, and Walker also sees a far greater willingness on the part of businesses to step up to the plate and introduce more eco-friendly practices.

“But we are not going fast enough, not nearly fast enough,” she says. “We thought we had lots more time, but it’s running out. We can see that everywhere – in Russia, Australia, Sweden, California, with forest fires, hurricanes, droughts and floods.

“It’s not subtle any more – temperatures have been wildly disproportionate to what we’ve had before and we’ve never seen hurricanes of this intensity. It’s as though the atmosphere is on steroids.”

Fortunately, she believes that there is still time to avert total catastrophe.

“We already have most of the technologies in place to fix this. A host of renewable and low-carbon power sources are

becoming cheaper by the day. There are new circular designs of products to build in recycling from the very beginning, as well as strategies and processes to eliminate the absurd amount of waste we generate. There are even new ways to capture greenhouse gases before they escape into the atmosphere, or to soak up those that have already been released, and store them in soils or rocks.”

The main remaining block to progress, she says, is people’s rigid mindsets. And that’s where the youth of today come in. “When I ask CEOs what has made them change their minds, so many of them say it was their sons, daughters or grandchildren. It’s brilliant the way the young generation are owning this.”

Companies such as Unilever have been leading the way in taking responsibility to deliver a more sustainable future. Back in 2010, the multinational consumer group, then headed by Paul Polman, pledged to halve the environmental impact of its products by 2020.

At the time, Polman told investors the company had been around for 100 years and wanted to survive for several hundred years more. The target has since been pushed back to 2030, but Unilever is still an environmental pioneer, even as its peers take a more active approach.

“Most businesses and governments now recognise that the cost of inaction is greater than the cost of action. There are some who will never change – and they will go down,” Walker says. “We must give power to the ones that will change.” She is also encouraged by what she describes as a “seismic shift” in the investment sector.

“A few years ago, there were murmurings along the lines of ‘maybe we ought to look at this’. Today, investors are coming to the realisation that there’s a material financial risk in failing to act,” she says.

*“In 2050, what does the world look like? Transport has been electrified, energy is clean, there are vertical city farms and there’s no air pollution.”*

There is increasing evidence, too, that ignoring climate-related risks and potential low-carbon opportunities could be a losing investment strategy, even in the short to medium term. Extreme weather events are already a direct risk to many assets, and others can quickly become a liability or stranded, as policy responses and consumer demand take hold. Many institutional investors are now convinced that their fiduciary duty requires them to take climate issues on board, and the old narrative that environmental, social and governance-focused investments inevitably lost money is being replaced by a new one saying that climate-related strategies are essential for positive returns.

All of these developments should help to release the capital, resources and, above all, the human creativity needed to build a zero-carbon world. That is why Walker is so keen to focus on the dream of what could still be possible if we work together.

“In 2050, what does the world look like? Transport has been electrified, energy is clean, there are vertical city farms and there’s no air pollution. You’re walking

through a city and it sounds and smells like a forest. More stuff will be produced locally, helping people to take back control of their communities, an urge that seems increasingly prevalent today. That’s the dream. And that is what we need to strive for and sell to believers and sceptics alike,” she says.

## IMPORTANT INFORMATION

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