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## Dr. Paul Sutton

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## **Dr. Paul Sutton**

### **Abstract**

This interview with Dr. Paul Sutton was conducted by the DUURJ Editor At Large.

### **Keywords**

Dr. Paul Sutton, Interview, Biography, Career

### **Publication Statement**

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## Dr. Paul Sutton

Department of Geography and the Environment

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Ayanna Schubert<sup>1</sup>, on behalf of the Editorial Board

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### **1 WHAT SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN, OR DREW YOU TO, YOUR FIELD? WHY DID YOU BECOME A SCIENTIST? WHAT MAKES YOU GET UP IN THE MORNING?**

I grew up in the Hollywood Hills of Los Angeles, California (Laurel Canyon) during the 1960's. The movie 'Soylent Green' and the chest pain I experienced with deep breaths during smog alerts had a significant impact on me and my nascent perception of the Human-Environment-Sustainability problematic. A famous 1971 public service announcement on TV featuring what appears to be a Native American with a single tear flowing down his cheek as he looks upon a littered American landscape undoubtedly influenced me also (this PSA is one of the most famous ever made despite the fact that the 'Native American' (aka Iron Eyes Cody) was likely of Italian origin<sup>1</sup>).

I later moved to Santa Barbara during my High School years and was deeply influenced by the works of Rachel Carson, Paul Ehrlich, and Garrett Hardin. Needless to say, my early childhood experiences primed me to be significantly influenced by perhaps manipulative PSAs, apocalyptic movies, and Neo-Malthusian jeremiads. Nonetheless, this was the era in which the Environmental Protection Agency was established along with the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, and even Earth Day. This suite of environmental problems was even more poignant in the smoggy air of my adolescence in Los Angeles.

As a young man, I came to believe almost all of these kinds of problems were driven by overpopulation. I ran tables at Earth Day for Zero Population Growth right next to the Planned Parenthood table and learned that empowering women helped address the population problem and solved other problems as well. As my understanding of our social and environmental problems grew, I became increasingly convinced not that 'It's the economy stupid' but rather, 'It's the stupid economy'. Our prevailing neo-liberal, free market, capitalist, economic system demands infinite growth to function, and so far, that growth has come at the expense of other species, non-renewable natural resources, and damage to our environment. Neither our population nor our economy can grow on like this. We know it is unsustainable. I believe our value system is broken and we need to attribute a much higher value to the natural world as a commonwealth in order to support not only our economy but our very existence. To wit, we spend over eight billion dollars for costumes and lawn decorations for Halloween. Eight billion dollars for ONE single day. The entire ANNUAL budget for the national park service in the United States is roughly three billion dollars. Most of the Halloween purchases will be in a landfill within a month. This distorted value system is a clear and present threat to achieving the sustainable development goals outlined by the United Nations.

Sadly, we have adopted ideas of efficiency from economists as the way to run our government when government should prioritize resilience over efficiency. If we truly want our government to be efficient, we

would run our national parks the way we do airlines, which means no empty seats – campgrounds full all the time. Increasingly this is how many of our national parks are being run. Additionally, the parks will tend to raise prices to restrict campground space (or develop lottery systems which favor people with money and flexibility), which counters the intended purpose of the national parks. What we need is more campgrounds, and what we want is not to run our national parks on an efficiency basis, but on a resilience basis. Resilience is this ability to absorb shocks, or the waves of people that might want to visit our national parks. If the parks want to be able to absorb more visitors, they should never be full. But we need to recognize that resilience and efficiency are tradeoffs within our economic system. You cannot simultaneously maximize efficiency and resilience.

I want my students to be realistic about the way the world is. There's this whole eco-anxiety and climate grief thing that can be debilitating. Despair and/or denial are bad choices with respect to moving forward. So, I have tried to embed a 'solutions' perspective into my teaching. I really believe the solutions are in governance. I think we have regulatory capture and state capture, to such an extent that very wealthy individuals and very wealthy and influential corporations have basically bought our government so that the government doesn't regulate them in ways that encourage us to be stewards of the environment. Rex Tillerson, former CEO of Exxon, was Secretary of State under Trump. Hank Paulson was at Goldman Sachs, and then he was Secretary of the Treasury under Obama. This revolving door between people in the corporate world trained in economics and the efficiency/utility maximization ideology, will take dramatic pay cuts down to salaries in the \$200,000 to \$300,000 a year in the government. Why do they do this? To make sure that the government doesn't interfere with the ability of their 'former' companies to make crazy amounts of profit. They then return to their multi-million dollar a year gigs in the private sector that they were up until recently 'regulating'. This is one manifestation of what is called 'state capture' or 'regulatory capture'. It is a failure of governance. Many of the environmental issues we are challenged with result from a failure of governance. When my students demand a 'solutions'-oriented curriculum I decided to 'walk the talk' by running for office in government – where I believe the basis of the problems lay.

So, I tried. I ran for office, and now I'm on the town council of the little town I live in. I learned a lot about governance and the pressures and tradeoffs you must deal with in governance. I encourage my students to be politically active and to vote. Voting is much more important than not using plastic straws. We're in an economic system that is not going to fix itself. If you're Bill Gates, or Elon Musk, or Mark Zuckerberg, or one of

these billionaires, why would you want system change? The system that we live in has been very very good for these multi-billionaires and I believe their wealth makes them think they are more brilliant than they actually are. Musk is tweeting about how to solve the Ukraine crisis, and that we need global population growth so we can get to Mars. Many of these people get ridiculous megalomaniacal ideas about how brilliant they are. As far as I am concerned none of them are as brilliant as the people that made the COVID mRNA vaccine.

## 2 DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT RESEARCH IN LAYMAN'S TERMS.

I believe that we have an economic system that is unsustainable. The vast number of scientists who agree with me have worked in a variety of ways to develop persuasive evidence-based arguments that demonstrate many of the ways in which our economic system is in fact unsustainable. One of my research agendas is valuing nature, or in academic parlance, putting a dollar value on ecosystem services. I've published a great deal on this topic. A key point of this research is to point out that we don't allocate resources wisely. I conduct ecosystem service valuations using satellite imagery, GIS, benefits transfer, and a variety of economic methods.

Some of my political activism is associated with this research. I engage from a science-based perspective in what have sadly become political issues - climate change, loss of biodiversity, and sustainability. I also regard myself as a Neo Malthusian in that I believe that the global human population is not going to stabilize at 10 or 12 billion. It's going to come down, because we have exceeded our ecological footprint, and there will be consequences for that. We are lying to ourselves if we think we can live sustainably and happily at 12 billion people. We're not living sustainably now. That is why climate change and loss of biodiversity are such concerns. Yogi Berra has a great quote, "If you don't know where you're going, you'll end up someplace else." I try to paint a picture of where we want to go, what a solutions-oriented future looks like. I think it's going to be 2 to 3 billion people. I think having a vision of the future is important. And I think it's going to be solar panels and windmills and tidal energy. We're probably going to be consuming less in the United States and people in the developing world will be consuming more; we must reduce inequality. We must have a functioning government. We need a government that is not bought and paid for by billionaires and corporations. My first-year seminar is titled 'Envisioning Utopia' through the lens of a well-being economy. Based on the trajectory and history of what I see manifesting, I try to encourage students to put kindling on the little hope fire and fight the system, so that we can change the system.

### **3 WHAT IS THE MOST FRUSTRATING, AND MOST REWARDING ACTIVITY, RESPECTIVELY, IN YOUR DAY-TO-DAY WORK?**

My dean wants me to bring in grant money. My research agenda is focused on bringing about system change. The current economic system that we operate in typically doesn't want to provide money to people who are proposing systems change. This is frustrating. While I do feel like Don Quixote when engaged in much of my research, I do find it rewarding that many avenues of research that I've been working on that didn't get funded are now established and accepted as viable and useful. For example, using satellite imagery as a proxy measure of population parameters, ecological footprints, and economic activity. Ecosystem service valuation was a crazy idea back in the 90s when I started working on this, and now it's in Obama's memos<sup>2</sup>. In fact, the Biden-Harris Administration has recently released a 'National Strategy to put Nature on the Nation's Balance Sheet'<sup>3</sup>. I provided public comment on this strategy alongside several Nobel Prize-winning economists. Ironically, it was economists who argued that addressing climate change was too expensive and that valuing natural capital and ecosystem services was a fool's errand. It is becoming increasingly clear that these economists were tragically wrong. In Greek mythology, Cassandra was cursed with the ability to predict the future, but no one listened to her. I often feel I have Cassandra's curse.

Nonetheless, I do find it rewarding to run into colleagues at conferences, getting invited to go to other places where there are other people that think the same thing I do or at least engage seriously with my ideas. These colleagues are highly cited, successful academics. So, I don't feel alone, and I don't feel like I need to wear a tinfoil hat. The people I respect are on the same page as me. But it's lonely for all of us. Many of us feel isolated at our own universities and feel much like we imagine the boy in the story 'The emperor's new clothes' felt when pointing out that the emperor was naked. One example of this is Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Chu who served as President Obama's Energy Secretary. Chu stated:

"The world economy is based on ever-increasing population, a scheme that economists don't talk about and that governments won't face, a scheme that makes sustainability impossible and is likely to eventually fail. The world needs a new model of how to generate a rising standard of living that's not dependent on a pyramid scheme."

### **4 WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE TO IMPROVE HOW WORK IN YOUR FIELD IS DONE? IN OTHER WORDS, WHAT LEGISLATION MIGHT YOU PASS OR WHAT POLICIES WOULD YOU CHANGE AND WHY?**

I have lots of ideas about policy in general: 1) Stop subsidizing fossil fuels; 2) Outlaw planned obsolescence; 3) Get money out of politics – start by overturning the Supreme Court decision known as 'Citizen's United'. As an educator at a university, I think we should force the state governments to fund their public institutions. I would suggest that the annual cost of tuition at any state school should not be more than what a student working full-time at minimum wage could earn through the summer in that state. Obviously, that's not going to pay all of the costs of that education. The rest should be provided by state and federal subsidies for higher education. I have written an Op-Ed on this topic in the Boulder Daily Camera titled: The Road to Idiocracy<sup>4</sup>. Higher education is increasingly a mechanism for increasing rather than decreasing inequality while simultaneously eroding the relatively strong meritocracy that America has had in the past.

### **5 CAN YOU SHARE A TURNING POINT OR DEFINING MOMENT IN YOUR WORK AS A RESEARCHER?**

As a grad student, I was working on nighttime satellite imagery and public opinion of population issues. I had read in the literature of the trans-discipline of ecological economics, which is now one of my research agendas and important to ecosystem service valuation. The University of Santa Barbara was having a workshop where faculty from throughout the world were going to come and write a paper and do a global assessment of the value of the world's ecosystem services. As a grad student, I went down there and said "Can I watch you guys? Operate the overhead projector or something?" And they said, "You can participate in the work." Consequently, I was a co-author on a paper with these people; it was really rich and rewarding. There were economists and ecologists and geographers arguing about the value of nature and the nature of value. How do you do it? How do you map it? I got to do some aspects of the figures and participate in the writing and the discussion that produced the paper. This paper<sup>5</sup> that valued the world's ecosystem services, and natural capital came up with a value that the natural world annually provides value in the form of ecosystem services that is more than the entire global market economy. This upset most economists, so this paper was critiqued and ridiculed by them. Nonetheless, this paper is one of the most cited papers in the field of environmental science. This was a big turning point in my career that I'm very

grateful for.

## 6 IF YOU COULD GO BACK IN TIME AND GIVE ADVICE TO YOURSELF BEFORE YOU BEGAN YOUR CAREER, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

I got a degree in chemistry, which was cool, but I wish I got more programming under my belt to have the ability to do coding and programming to support my future work in geography. I would have liked it if there had been more programming and coding theory classes in my training.

## 7 ARE THERE ANY OTHER FUN FACTS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?

I'm on the board of trustees of the town of Morrison, and I did that because my students pushed me to be involved in solutions. I believe the solutions are in politics. I've learned a lot from doing that and it's been a fun fact in my life; nonetheless, it's a lot of work. I'm encouraging my students to get involved in politics, but it's hard, and it takes time, and I'm doing this for free. It's not a paid position; we just voted so that, once I'm done, future members of the board of trustees will be paid \$500 a month because it takes 20-30 hours a month. When important local government positions are done by volunteers, you end up with people who have the time and money to volunteer doing the work. Consequently, governance becomes dominated by people who have the free time rather than people who are working two jobs and don't have 20 to 30 hours a week to give away to the governance of their own town. I'm proud, and I don't use this word lightly, of the town of Morrison, which has had a population of 400 for over 100 years. I personally think that's what sustainability looks like. I have written about the challenges facing local government in this Op-Ed titled: *We can't solve the problems of growth with 'good' growth*<sup>6</sup>.

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