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The Life Connection

OUR QUALITY OF LIFE IS ABOUT THE CONNECTIONS WE MAKE

Payson Stevens

On India, Our
Environment,
& His Energy
Landscapes

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Payson Stevens

On India • Our Environment • and Art

Trained in both art and science, Stevens is a San Diego resident who divides his time annually between the Indian Himalayas and Del Mar, California. Originally trained in molecular biology at the City University of New York and in oceanography at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, Stevens studied at the Arts Students League and the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Stevens founded two award-winning companies, InterNetwork, Inc. and InterNetwork Media, Inc. and was a 1994 recipient of the Presidential Design Award for Excellence from Bill Clinton. Stevens was lead author of *Embracing Earth: New Views of Our Changing Planet* (Chronicle Books, 1992), which appeared in four foreign-language editions.

Since 2000, he has advised on environmental, sustainable livelihood and ecotourism issues for the Great Himalayan National Park (www.greathimalayannationalpark.com). He is a founding member and Board Advisor of My Himachal (www.mychimachal.com), a US non-profit and Indian NGO. Formed in 2006, it is dedicated to uplift the lives of rural Himachal Pradesh villagers and protect the environment. (See next page for more on his art exhibit and fundraiser for My Himachal.)

His artwork focuses on energy flow in the natural world, resulting from extensive time spent in Nature, including California Mountains and deserts, Baja Mexico, the Southwest, Alaska, Antarctica, and the Indian Himalayas. www.energylandscapes.com. Recently, Marjorie Fox and Steve Hays talked with him at his Del Mar home. We covered so many topics it was easier to leave out our questions and group the conversation into areas he covered. David S. Cohen edited the exchange.



Environmental Work

Global warming and global change is happening in India. There's enormous recession of glaciers; we've been seeing that with satellites for decades now. I mean when I was working with NASA in the early '80s, that data started coming in. I have books filled with imagery from pictures taken over a series of years—you can just see, both on the ground and from space, the recession of the glaciers. They're basically retreating in most parts of the world. But there are also ways of measuring them with radar: there's synthetic aperture radar, there are sensors that send down radar beams, and they can measure sea ice, for example, in the Arctic and Antarctic. We're showing, for the first time this last two seasons, that the retreat is so extensive that the Northwest Passage is opening—it's never been open in recorded history!

We've been watching this from space and on the ground. I have a global perspective because that's what I did for 25 years: I worked on global issues, working with NASA on remote sensing. My whole daily life was looking at these images and working with other scientists and communicating this information to policymakers and to educators. That's what my companies did: InterNetwork and InterNetwork Media. We basically took all this dense information and tried to reach both policymakers and the community at-large, the educated – colleges, high schools.

NASA, NOAA, the U.S. Geological Survey – they saw all of this happening and said, "Part of our charge is to make ev-

eryone aware of what's going on." That was part of my work and my training; what my companies did was to try and bring this imagery to both the scientific community and the general public. I worked with Al Gore and we did conferences and I presented at conferences; in the late '80s, Robert Redford put the first greenhouse gas conference on with the Russians and we were all together.

We did a lot of stuff and there was a lot of noise that was made. People who had the ability to get the public's attention, like Redford and Gore and the environmentalists, if they had been listened to, even in a small way, we wouldn't be in the serious situation that I believe we're in.

Global Warming

You know, it's very complicated. It's very cold right now in India on the plains; it's bitter cold – one of the worst. And they're saying, "Where's global warming?" People don't understand, it's not the temperature in any one place—and this is the way the whole argument gets distorted—it's the planet, it's the whole planet. So in any one or ten places, there's going to be a lot of variability. We can't predict what the temperature in San Diego is going to be, but there is a general pattern of increasing temperature of the ocean because there are more greenhouse gases, which are heating up the planet. And the ocean's this big thermostat that absorbs the heat. As the heat's absorbed, it gives



Dark Forest Variation 6, oil, 21x33 in, 2009

back the heat. And that's why we have more intense storms, for example.

In India we're seeing a lot more variability—the monsoon is not as regular. That's a very critical thing because India depends on the monsoon for its agriculture, the natural rains. There's recession of the glaciers, which means the flow of water is going to be changing. There may be more flooding because it's warming and melting. And they're building dams, which is based on having so much water ten years from now and who knows what's really going to happen.

All of these things are very complicated. You cannot make some simplistic geographic statement, other than say, "Yeah, it's getting warmer." The monsoon this year was late; the storms before the monsoon were severe and they destroyed the apple crop in Himachal Pradesh. Everything is kind of haywire. So it is happening.

I've also seen it on the treks that I've done. I've been to all the major sources of the rivers coming out of the great Himalaya National Park. I've been to them multiple times, and I've seen the recession of the glaciers. So that's just one aspect—whether there'll be more drought in India, it's hard to predict what exactly will happen. The general patterns are there.

One of the things that I can see happening from the warming, that's taking place is that in the beginning, when we were living in our valley, there was never even a concern about malaria. Malaria is a very big problem in India and the world—tropical areas, warm areas. Well, last year the Anopheles Mosquito got to 6,200 feet and we're at 6,700! That was a wake-up call.

And it was obvious, because I knew from my work and working with doctors, physicians that were concerned about the epidemiology of global change, what was going to happen. As things warm, disease vectors – we're going to spread both into

Special Reception Feb. 21

"My Himachal" Fundraiser Featuring the Art of Payson R. Stevens

Southwestern College Art Gallery will host the U.S. premier of noted painter Payson R. Stevens with a retrospective his work. **ENERGY LANDSCAPES** will show paintings and drawings going back to the 1970s in the Main Gallery, as well as Stevens pioneering Interactive multimedia work, computer generated graphics, books and posters in the Student Art Gallery. The Southwestern College show is the first major U. S. exhibit of Stevens work. He has shown his work extensively in India, most recently at the US Embassy, American Center in New Delhi.

The Southwestern College exhibit and reception will be held at their Art Gallery Feb. 21 from 2-5 pm. The purpose of the special reception is to raise funds for the NGO, My Himachal. Stevens will discuss his paintings and the synthesis of science, technology and fine art that his characterize his career.

Well-known adventurer, television personality and Fortune 500 motivational speaker Dr. Jeff Salz will host the event and discuss Stevens' work in India. All proceeds from the sale of the artwork will be donated to My Himachal to help fund childhood health, malnutrition projects and preparing rural villagers for the impacts of climate change.

The exhibit of his work will be open to the public from Jan.

28 to Feb. 24 (Mon.-Thur. 10:30am–2 pm, Wed./Thur. 6-8 pm) Parking is free on the day of the receptions. The gallery number is 619.421.6700 ext. 5383.

Stevens studied at the Arts Students League and the School of Visual Arts in New York City. He has been involved with traditional and new media as an artist, designer, writer, and film maker for 40 years.

Stevens is currently painting and drawing in his studio in Del Mar and during annual trips to the Kullu Valley, India where he lives part of the year with his wife, the writer Kamla Kapur.

While living in India, Stevens witnessed the impacts of rural poverty: pervasive child malnutrition, limited immunizations for childhood diseases, and few doctors. Moved by these conditions, he helped found the US and Indian NGO, My Himachal (www.mychimachal.com) with a focus on child health care, education, and environmental conservation. Stevens and My Himachal were recipients of San Diego's Project Concern International's "Hands Across the Borders" award in 2008. See www.energylandscapes.com/

northern and southern latitudes and elevation—this way and this way. And what else: pests that affect crops: as it gets warmer, they'll start spreading.

It's all interrelated. It's just hit me, talking to you, that when you study the ocean, especially the period when I studied, in the '60s, we didn't know anything about anything. The ocean is still a big mystery. But to get your graduate training, you had to study four disciplines in oceanography: biological, geological, chemical and physical oceanography. They had recently identified Seafloor Spreading and Continental Drift when I was at Scripps in '68, which was a major shift—one of the great scientific revolutions.

So even our whole understanding of the way our climate worked was just being revealed; it was the equivalent of Darwinism 100 years earlier. This explained a lot of what we saw on our planet. So the education we got then was like you had to see the big picture. Now more and more in all disciplines you're being forced to specialize, specialize, specialize. So that big thinking, which was part of my training—and what I learned from Roger Ravelle, who was my mentor there, because he was a big thinker—the things I'm doing now, all these different pieces, which might seem very disparate, they're sort of the way I think. I think in relationships and patterns, whether it's in my painting, my artwork, or in trying to see how to put things together. It's a big puzzle.

Relationship with India

My wife Kamla is Indian. I met her 13 years ago when she was teaching at Grossmont College; she's a writer, and teaches literature and mythology. She wanted to spend more time in her home country—her parents were aging. So we started going every year. When it looked like she was going to retire from teaching, we decided to build a house and look for land. I did not expect that. I mean if you had told me even 15 years ago, before I met Kamla, I'd be living half my year where I'm living now, I'd have laughed; I mean I would have said more likely I would have ended up on Mars. I feel like I'm from another galaxy anyway, so I'm waiting to go home.

I feel like now I've moved into my elderhood—I'm mentoring people in India, young men in India and some young men here. And because Kamla and I don't have children this is a way, sort of, for us to have a larger family. But living in India, in a rural area, you cannot, if you're half alive and come from this privileged culture, you cannot fail to be affected by the poverty and the experience. That has had an influence on my approach to living and what I want to do.

I knew, when I moved back to India, that I was going back to serve, in some way, the concept of *Seva* – the Indian concept of giving back, but I thought it was just going to be in terms of me and the work I had been doing in the Great Himalayan National Park almost since its opening in 2000. I've basically been an advisor on sustainable livelihoods and nature conservation in India's newest national park, where they've set aside 760 square kilometers—the only protected part of the western Himalayas. (You can learn more about it at greathimalayannationalpark.com.) But at the same time it excluded poor people who had been living there for centuries, if not millennia—people who were

dependent on the resources of the forest for their livelihoods: the animals that were endangered, the birds that were endangered, the herbs that were endangered—all of this stuff: the trees. And so in a poor country, much more so than here, you have to help people also; they're together.

So that was the work I did for a number of years. And then when we started building a home the poverty thing started. I wasn't just going in and trekking and interacting; I was living there. And it was a very different experience. That's when the whole engagement with children—children were getting very sick; they were dying from basic childhood diseases. A woman died from a breach birth in front of where we were building and we could do nothing. There were no doctors. And there's still basically no decent medical health care.

From working with the National Park to working with the people

I've been doing this ten years, first with the park and dealing with those issues, and since 2006 with the health issues. It was all part of an evolving process of realization. I shifted from just the environmental aspect to the whole issue of sustainable livelihoods for the people—you know, give people jobs, help them so that they don't have to go into the park and exploit those resources.

That's where I started—that was the issue. But then we're living there and all of a sudden I'm seeing these very serious health problems. And I thought to myself: "How can I expect that these people to be concerned about our environmental concerns—what arrogance!" They're going to give two hoots about not going into the park when they need firewood, when they need food, and on and on and on and on! And that was like the epiphany: seeing what's really needed here, and that the kids are very sick and they're malnourished—that's the core issue.

So I shifted some of my time – I still advise and do work with the park, but I shifted to the issues around health and education, gender issues. And that was the transformation for me in terms of my focus.

Founding a Non-Profit: My Himachal

My Himachal was founded in 2006. In 2005, when our home was finished, Kamla and I had made a vow that when that was done I would start figuring out how to help the community and the child health care—I mean it was in our face. I knew basic first aid and people were constantly coming, when they found out what I did for health problems. And I knew that I wasn't in a position to do anything, other than antibiotic cleaning or this or that, or diagnose: "Go see the doctor, you have the measles, you have the mumps." Kids were going to school with measles and mumps and then spreading it around.

So in 2005 there was a little rural clinic in the next village that was only being used once a month by a major mission hospital three hours away. So we went on the day that it was open and I spoke to these two Indian doctors and asked them, I said, "I want to help – what can I do?" And they said – they gave me a list. Just on our own, with the community, we organized a traveling health fair, in which we went to the villages. This is

the issue: it's all mountainous and it's very hard for the women, since they do most of the work, to bring their kids in, to go to a doctor that's three or four or five hours away with hiking and buses and what-not.

We went to that, and that's what we've been doing. Over the years we've worked with doctors, Indians and foreigners, New Zealanders, going into the villages so that it's easy for them to get some basic health care issues taken care of.

In 2006, I was contacted by a young Indian named Adnish Katosh. He's from the state of Himachal Pradesh, where we live. He found me on the internet through the work in the park, which is in Himachal. And he said, "I want to get back to my state also"—he's here in America. He's a young IT guy with a family and he works in Pennsylvania. And he said, "What can we do?" I said, "Well let's see if we can start a Non-Governmental Organization with the people you know." So we founded this NGO: My Himachal.

It has now taken over some of the work I was doing as an individual, and it's focused now on organization, nonprofit here in the U.S. and in India. The work that I was involved in has expanded out with more people in it. Other people from Himachal who are here in this state wanted to do education, so there's a small scholarship fund. It's all very small-scale, sort of Schumacher's "small is beautiful" philosophy has been the operating paradigm for the most part. 100% of what's been raised has gone directly for whatever is needed. Only this past year, as we've expanded, has there been a little bit of salary set aside for people, Indians, because you can't expect Indians and India to work without getting some kind of compensation.

We've trained women to be health care workers—that's a really good thing. They're from the villages, and they go into this mountainous area, and they understand what the nutritional issues are, they can see there's a tremendous amount of malnutrition. They can talk to the mothers about breastfeeding or about one or two good meals a day, or whatever the issues are.

Training women provides them employment also, which is a good issue, and raises their status in the villages. The issues around women's needs are pretty important in the rural areas, where there's a lot of poverty. They work the hardest.

In India, they don't say, "I'm from," they say, "I belong to." When I first started doing this work, I didn't quite grok, I didn't quite get it. But now I understand: we have our ego and "We're from"—we take New York or San Francisco. But the way people think there is that they're part of a community, and they belong to it. And it's a very interesting sort of linguistic difference. There is a sense of community that's different. And these people, these mountain people, have taught me a lot. They don't have the education I have and they don't have the material comfort and resources that I have, but they have a dignity and inner core that is really impressive to me. I've made new friends in India. I have more friends in India than I have here.

What works for me now is being on the ground and having the one-to-one relationship with people. My strategy for My Himachal and the mission is that we really build strong ground teams, because many organizations come: World Wildlife or whatever, they want to come—they work, but without a good ground team, where you're integrated and you're known in the community and you have some cache, it's very hard to get

anything done. You have to have the trust and the respect of the local people. So that's the model that My Himachal is developing and hoping to develop more. And what I'm doing while I'm on the ground there, for part of my time: advising and directing and putting things together and using my network in the States. I have a good network in Himachal now, in terms of the issues that we're working on.

Being an Artist

Even in the years that I ran my businesses, I never stopped doing art. I would get up 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning. I've always done art. It's almost like I don't have any say in the matter: it does me.

I've always done it. When I was in Baja in the early '70s, all the way through now in India. Less so in the heat of my career, you know, professionally but when I went out on research, like in '96 a friend of mine was studying glaciers and global warming and he needed some help with field work and I went up to Alaska with him. He was the top glaciologist at the U.S. Geological Survey. He needed help and it wasn't in the budget, so I went up and worked for two weeks for free. I worked eight, ten hours in the field, measuring glaciers and potholes and sinkholes. And Kamla gave me these little black notebooks in the morning and at night, because everything was white, against these little black notebooks I made drawings. And I'd go do my work and I'd come back and make more drawings.

And when I came back to Del Mar, even though I had a ton of work to do, I did a whole series of paintings, which you'll see in the exhibit on the Bering Glacier work. So it's always been there, it just — it's what it is.

The first painting I did, in 1964, which my brother has in New York—I mean I can look at these India paintings from September, before I left India—it's the same guy. Even though they're really different. And what's the same? I've been preoccupied, in the artist state, with understanding the energy of the natural world. And that's what my work is about, and why my website is called Energy Landscapes, and why the exhibits that I've had in museums in India have titles like "Energy Flows" or "Dark Forest."

I consider my work as an artist, as a painter, as important and as meaningful as anything I'm doing with my life right now. The way my parents brought me up, I was taught that I had to give back, to give back to society.

I'm fulfilling that in various aspects of my career—all along in my career. And the painting is part of that also, for two reasons: one, when I'm in balance by doing what is important in my inner soul life, as a painter, then I feel from a spiritual perspective, there is one more little piece of the whole pictures that's in harmony. That's the way, on an energetic level, that we bring about a little more balance in the world.

I encourage everybody, whatever it is you really want, as Joseph Campbell said: Follow your bliss. Try and find that bliss, where you're in your bliss, whatever it is you're doing, whether walking down the beach or finding that time. That balance that you create for yourself helps the resonant energy of this dimension that we're in — this sphere. So the painting is very important for me because that's where I sort of connect up to the Great Beyond, or whatever you want to call it.