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Green' conference fosters dialogue, dissent

By: Alex Roehrka

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The Brown is Green conference, which aims to bring together experts and activists from across a variety of backgrounds in a dialogue about environmental sustainability, kicked off yesterday with a panel featuring the Watson International Scholars for the Environment and an art exhibition at Hillel exploring the history of an 80-year old campus elm tree that fell prey to Dutch Elm Disease in 2003.

But the conference will really get underway this afternoon when a number of environmental movers and shakers converge on College Hill for a series of lectures and panels.

Event organizers said that the conference was originally conceived as an opportunity to foster better communication between a diverse group of scientists, policymakers, businesspeople and activists who all fall under the banner of the "sustainability movement."

Event organizer Aden Van Noppen '09 said she hopes to get conference participants "fired up" about sustainability.

"I hope for both the speakers and people attending the conference - for everyone - to have their assumptions questioned," Van Noppen said. A dearth of discussion and disagreement among those interested in sustainability has meant that contemporary environmental problems are addressed with the antiquated strategies of 1970's vintage environmentalism, she said. But Brown, with its reputation for "innovative thinking and the questioning of the status quo," is the perfect venue for generating innovative ideas about sustainability and setting new standards for environmental leadership, Van Noppen added.

At 2:30 p.m., former president of the Sierra Club and Global CEO of Saatchi and Saatchi S. Adam Werbach '95 will deliver an address on environmental leadership. Werbach dropped jaws at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco in 2004 by declaring environmentalism dead. At the same venue earlier this month, he unveiled a new perspective for understanding and achieving environmental sustainability that he says goes beyond the popular concept of "green" to "blue."

"'Blue' integrates all four streams of sustainability: social, cultural, economic and environmental," Werbach said in his speech earlier this month. "'Blue' puts the way we treat ourselves and each other at the center of our focus."

Van Noppen said she expects Werbach to put forth a holistic prescription for climate change issues that emphasizes positive action instead of the mainstream dialogue about sustainability, which tends to harp on making sacrifices by curbing environmentally harmful behavior.

Later in the afternoon, Stanford University climatologist Stephen Schneider will deliver a lecture titled "The World Around Us: Global Environmental Change." Schneider has served in a number of environmental policy advisory positions and has for decades advocated sharp cuts in greenhouse gas emissions as a strategy for curbing global warming. He has published numerous books on the topics of global warming, climate change policy and environmental biology.

Ira Magaziner '69 P'06 P'07 P'10, chairman of the Clinton Climate Initiative and the Clinton Foundation HIV/AIDS Initiative, will deliver this evening's keynote address, titled "Turning Words into Action." Immediately afterwards, a panel of state legislators will respond to Magaziner's talk. The day's events will conclude with a screening of the film "Into the Wild" on the Main Green.

The conference will continue Saturday with several panels on sustainable design, green business and sustainability in Rhode Island, and will conclude with a dinner featuring locally grown foods.

Absent from Friday's events will be Gov. Donald Carcieri '65, who cancelled his afternoon appearance due to legislative commitments, said event organizer and UCS President Michael Glassman '09.

"We're disappointed about that," Glassman said.

Asked whether or not event organizers feared any disruptive demonstrations in the same vein as the pie attack on New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, who spoke on campus Tuesday, Glassman said that the matter had been discussed and that event organizers are "prepared."

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