

A New Angle — Conrad Anker, July 1, 2021

Justin Angle This is A New Angle. A show about cool people doing awesome things in and around the great state of Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications, and the University of Montana College of Business. Hey folks. Welcome, and thanks for tuning in. It is a great honor to bring our show to Montana Public Radio. For many years, Brian Kahn had a show called Homeground that aired in this timeslot. Brian was a master at engaging difficult topics through conversation as a way to bring us all closer together. Here at A New Angle, we aspire to honor Brian's legacy and bring you conversations you can learn from. Today's conversation is with Conrad Anker.

Conrad Anker We are the first generation to completely understand the effects of anthropogenic climate change, and quite possibly could be the last generation to create effective change. So, everyday we dilly-dally, the effect in forty years will be a lot more profound.

Justin Angle Conrad is a legendary mountaineer, and leader in the outdoor community. He's climbed some of the hardest routes on the most notorious mountains around the World, from Everest to Antarctica. Conrad is also a mentor, philanthropist, and activist. In particular, he's working to raise the volume on the climate crisis along with his colleagues at Protect Our Winters — a non profit working to protect the places we love from the effects of climate change. And Conrad has had a front-row seat to climate change in his many years traveling to wild landscapes significantly altered by warmer temperatures, more extreme weather, and many other factors. Conrad is also a Montanan. He and his family live in Bozeman and are actively engaged in the Montana

community. Conrad wants all of us to enjoy wild spaces and nature, to be more mindful of the climate when we do. I talked with Conrad in November. It was a great honor to spend some time with him and I'm excited for you to hear our conversation right now.

Conrad, thanks for coming on the podcast.

Conrad Anker Yeah, thank you, Justin. And it's a real honor to be on your show. Yeah.

Justin Angle Right before we started recording, you made the comment that this has been probably the most politically engaged time of your life. One of the motivations for this conversation is the importance of the issue of climate to you, you work with Protect Our Winters. Having had such a long and prolific career in the mountains and in wild spaces, when did climate kind of arrive on your radar screen as something you started thinking about?

Conrad Anker Probably the first inclination of heat and climate was probably where my grandmother and grandfather had a small restaurant in their place in central California. My brother and sister are still there. Both my parents have passed away. But I remember sitting one time there and watching a car pull up at the top of the grade and was overheating. And it was just the radiator exploded and the car was just and it was a common thing. It's a steep two thousand foot elevation gain it just hard on vehicles and then looking at the asphalt in the heat there. And now it's like every time one of these engines heats up, it warms up. And so that was kind of this understanding of warming when I was a teenager. But it came into being in the when I started mountain climbing and to go into alpine climbing and with trips to Alaska. So a lot of the research that you do prior to an expedition is looking at previous expeditions to

arrange where they climbed, what they'd done, and going all the way back to the Torsella in the 1890's, there's photographic record of climbing expeditions on the mountains. And so, in seeing the change that places in Alaska, the Himalayas, the Karakorum and routes that when they were established, they had a massive ice on them. And then subsequently they were not climbable at all. And two specific mountains. One was the Oger, which Doug Scott was famously rescued off with broken ankles and one of the greatest epic stories of survival. And the route that they climbed is no longer in existence. It's completely melted off and there's recently exposed granite there, which is not optimal for climbing. And then the other one was Cholatse in the Khumbu Himal. And there, the Firn line were the ablation of a glacier where it accumulates above and it dissipates, melts below and moved up three thousand feet, one thousand meters. And repeating a route, Cholatse, which was by climb by Verne Clevenger, Don Raul and John Ross Kelly. And we went to go climate 2005. And it was same sort of story that happened on the Oger that there the ice had just it melted away and there was a recently exposed rock on there. And in a similar way, looking at permanent snow fields here in Montana, one of the ways we can look at the stability of talis fields and how long rock has been exposed is the size of the lichen. And when you're in these mountain ranges Absarokes and you come across an area and it's like, wow, that place had a permanent snow field up until recently. Because just on this aspect over here, there's there's a centuries old lichen and then here there's absolutely nothing. And that had had a snowfield on it. So all these small indications that by by dint of being passionate about climbing, I was seeing the changes in the mountains.

Justin Angle And what effect is that having on on you? I mean, you're seeing some of it through your research. But as you mentioned before, whether it's in the Absarokes or

in Nepal or in Antarctica, like places you're traveling to again and again with with longer intervals in between, like how is this sort of affecting your relationship to these landscapes and how you're thinking about them?

Conrad Anker The, well, I'm a mountaineer, so I'm the ears in the mountains as a silly joke to the full dad-worthy jokes.

Justin Angle Yeah. Well done.

Conrad Anker Yeah. So we're were the eyes and ears in the mountains and climbing in the mountains, yeah, we'll be straight up. It's selfish. It's ego driven. It doesn't it's not like we're becoming better scientists or doctors or computer technicians or anything like that. We're going up there for for our own enjoyment, recreation, rejuvenation and ideally on a towards one self actualization of like what you really want to do in life.

Justin Angle Sure.

Conrad Anker And so, yeah, climbing is great. It's fun, but it's giving us a measuring stick. We are the canary in the coal mine with climate change that's happening now. And whereas, you know, if there might not be nice fruit guys coming season, they're shorter and will adapt to it. We'll have fun. But it's it's not like it's some major thing that that have a privileged white person like myself, male, tabooed, living in Montana. It's like, oh, you don't get as many days skiing in there. Yeah. Woohoo! But we are seeing climate change and the people that are affected by it are the people that aren't necessarily causing the level of CO2 increase. So, say for people in Bangladesh, the areas there that are affected by the typhoons and monsoons that come in and their

quality of life. So in places where there is seasonal flooding or Houston, Texas, getting hit twice with a hurricane in one season, things like that. These are real, tangible effects of what climate is. And if we experience in our recreation, that's good, but it's still the effects affect more people around the world than what we think and disproportionately lower income communities, communities of color. And so in that sense, there's a responsibility on our part to address this.

Justin Angle Absolutely. Have you, and I know it's been a year without a trip to the Himalaya, but knowing how important that community and the Sherpa are to you, has there been any effects within in those communities? Is it affecting their livelihood, their relationship to the land and so forth?

Conrad Anker In Nepal, there's not this societal question of 'is climate change real'? It's like, it's very real and —

Justin Angle It's happening.

Conrad Anker Yeah. And Nepal is by the current definition of victim because they are not producing the CO₂ per capita that's causing climate change. But like the people of the Maldives, the people of Nepal that are in the Himalayas, they are going to be suffering the effects of it. So near-term prognosis is accelerated melting of glaciers, those who then can release more water if the water leaves the mountains in a normal fashion, things are well. But the opportunity or the risk of glacial lake outburst floods. So where previous terminal moraines that were there from the eighteen fifties or fourteen thousand or twenty thousand years ago, those that fill up with water and then they're catastrophically released. So that would be an example of how in those

areas, but there's also most human observation of climate is anecdotal. Oh, it was warmer then, or at Thanksgiving they always did this. And they bring us a connection to it but it's not, Climate and weather are connected. Weather is what's happening today. Climate is a long term understanding of it. And for a lot of the people in the villages, they see these changes and there is a connection to atmospheric CO2, and so they're like climate change is real, what can we do on our part to help mitigate the challenges?

Justin Angle Yeah, it's interesting in the conservation space in general has been an area, and particularly in this sort of unique form of purple that Montana occupies, it's been an area where left and right can kind of come together and share some common objectives for how to be better stewards of of the land. Talk about your perspective on that, particularly here in Montana.

Conrad Anker Yeah. So Theodore Roosevelt was given a large credit, large amount of credit for the creation of the national park system and his deep belief in the rugged life and getting outdoors and the benefits of that. And then under President Nixon, we had the Environmental Protection Agency, the Clean Air and the Clean Water Act. So both of those are instances where people are with that. And Montana's interesting in that voters here are access to public lands and the quality of life that brought us to Montana and that keeps us here is of great importance. And so for many of the citizens of Montana Public Lands is their single issue voting. I encourage people not to be single issue voters about any one thing to be look at it from a holistic and from everything that's in their civil rights to economic opportunity and how we treat people and then including that the environment. But within Montanans that outdoors is such a part of our fabric that it it spills over into the political process.

Justin Angle Gosh, I mean, we should also mention that, you know, the sort of history of of the white man's relationship to the land here is fraught in many ways. And then you layer on top of that this notion of, you know, Montanans history as a state built on an extraction economy, now maybe transitioning to a state sort of built more on a tourism economy. You know, when you think about climate and conservation, environmental activism, I mean, one of the tools you can use to bring people into understanding the importance of these issues is getting them out there in wild spaces. You're getting more people out in wild spaces, puts more stress on the resource. And so there's this this balancing act. And then it's sort of a conversation about privilege. Well, just because I've been recreating in this space my whole life doesn't mean it's any more mine than somebody that's never been here before and wants to check it out and come to the party as well. How do you kind of think about those trade offs with regard to, you know, getting this message about the importance of climate out there but also being mindful of the impacts that getting more people out will have?

Conrad Anker Being outdoors is good for humans. It's good for our soul, it's a great way to recuperate and just being on a trail and being out of our oversubscribed plastic, steel, glass and concrete world, we get to be in nature and we we come back rejuvenated and it's... Whenever I see someone out recreating, I smile, I say hello to them, I'm glad people are out there having a good time. So, I think now after COVID, we realize that connecting with other people is part of the human experience, too. And whether you were to go to a concert or a stadium game, being in that space with those other humans is an affirmation of your being in your humanity. And in that same sense, if we look at seeing other people outdoors that they affirm our presence on this planet.

Justin Angle Yeah, that connection with other people is such an important thread. And it seems like it's been such an important thread in your life as well. Some of these just high profile expedition experiences you've had as a really where deep relationships and friendships and trust are forged through some shared suffering. Maybe talk about that a little bit. How have you come to connect with other people more deeply through your experiences in these wild places?

Conrad Anker Being outdoors is participatory. So if we go outside for our walk this afternoon or you're run, you're doing it yourself. You're not plugging into the media machine to watch a basketball game, which I enjoy watching. I love sports. But it's about going out in and doing that experience. And so, if, Justin, you and I were to climb together and hopefully get a chance to do that one of these days, that when we tie into the rope, we are a team. And our adversary is number one, gravity. Number two, the cliff that we're climbing on the feature of the rock, the type of rock, and we have the weather to layer on there. And throughout all of this, we have this connection that you're belaying me, your trust of me is what I need to enjoy nature. And so that connection that you have to trust another person in the outdoor spaces is priceless. And that is one of the good messages in that why people, when they when there is challenge is where there are ways that are there difficult that they they seek solace in the outdoors. And will use Camp David as an example outside of Washington, D.C., where here we have a retreat that the president could bring world leaders in that didn't have the structure and the authority of the of Washington, D.C. in the regulation and all of that, but rather it was outdoors and you can imagine them having a campfire and s'mores and then going for a walk in the deciduous hardwood forest there and talking about Mideast peace and doing those things. And that even something as simple as walking outdoors, you're watching out for the person you're there. I mean,

there could be a bear that jumps out of the trees or something like that, or a tree could fall down. There is some bit of risk that makes you connect to other human. And I think that's a good thing.

Justin Angle You know, something you said in there, you talked a little bit about risk. And that's a that's something I've I've wanted to ask you for a while, as you know, this relationship to risk and how it's sort of... It's got to be part of the attraction in some ways to climbing. But you're doing this with other people and you've sort of confronted risk on so many levels. It's kind of a constant. You've also had loss of both your mentors, of peers, of people you've been a mentor to. How do you kind of grapple with the concept of risk both in the moment and then over the over the arc of a lifetime in the wilderness?

Conrad Anker We go climbing and it's always that we're putting yourself in a more dangerous place. I mean, we could minimize all the risk and not go outdoors, but being outdoors where you have to perform. So, if you make a mistake, climbing gravity doesn't just know you don't get a boogie shot or whatever, a bogey shot, a makeover. It's like no. Gravity is going to just accelerate 'til you land at the bottom of a mountain and you're dead. And so, yeah, I've become far too too much of that. As you mentioned, my mentors, my peers and my people that I've my mentees and all of that is in there, that I've lost that. And there's danger, which is a threat to our existence, so identifying danger and then we evaluate that to see what the risk is. What is the risk of that danger of it happening to an individual? And for myself, my factory setting at birth was hyperactive, wired.

Justin Angle Sure.

Conrad Anker ADHD, it was crazy. I second grade with a challenge trying to get all this data come streaming into my mind. And I didn't have a to do list or I hadn't been outdoors. My parents were like, OK, no medication, more time outdoors, less sugar. That was just run this guy hot chocolate while talking to you were so tired that you laid down. So that was and I'm thankful for that because it set me on the right path and it was rather than a pharmacological solution to a child that was getting outdoors. And that trait of being hyper situationally aware is what has kept me alive in the mountains. So all that data that was screaming for my attention. Now when I'm outdoors, I'm listening to the snow pack. I'm I'm observing the snow pack. I'm making a decision whether I will ski that run, given the amount of data that I have in there. And so the same thing applies when you're climbing that all of a sudden when you're on a rock climb and you're you have to how do I hold onto that handhold for optimum and not fall off? Then, the rest of this stuff we call life of your mortgage payment that's due on the 5th of each month and covid crisis, all that —

Justin Angle Yeah, It doesn't matter.

Conrad Anker It's like it's gone. You are living in the moment. And in that sense, it's sort of this active meditation that gives us some somewhere to go in life.

Justin Angle We'll be back to our conversation with Mountaineer, Conrad Anker.

Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Mountaineer and Climate Activist, Conrad Anker, about what he's learned in a lifetime in the mountains.

Justin Angle So let's shift gears back to climate a little bit. I want to just call out more explicitly protect our Winters, an organization that you're affiliated with. There are so many groups doing important work with climate, with the environment. How did Protect Our Winters arrive on your radar screen? Why did you make the choice to to affiliate with this great organization?

Conrad Anker Jeremy founded it, I believe 2007. So and then 2011, he invited me to be on the board. We went and climbed Denali together and so we'd been friends and acquaintances and so but it's been a wonderful opportunity and great organization to see it grow to where it is. A wonderful group of colleagues that I'm on the board of directors with really make it worthwhile. And the beautiful part of this is that we are able to communicate with the 18 to 30 year old outdoor recreation person. They're passionate about being outdoors, whether it's trail running, skiing, hiking. Being outdoors is their reason of living and coming back to why we live in Montana. That same conversation a little bit earlier. And with Protect Our Winters, we're showing this group of people that are outdoor enthusiasts, here's the science. This is what climate change is. These are some experts that can help you talk about it. And we're encouraging them to talk about it. We're giving them permission to talk about it. We're giving them the responsibility to talk about it, and we're giving them the tools to talk about it. And that whole process of civic engagement has been... It's been a lot of fun to see how it's grown and that there's Protect Our Winter Winter's chapters that have sprouted up. Volunteer chapters in Europe and in Asia, just on their own, because people like this message resonates for our community. We want to help out. And so

there are some I think the more voices that team together that are climate aware then the better off we are. And Greta Thunberg and her work in the last couple of years as a young person has been there's been a great. It's been great to see that for children, young adults of that age, to be like, wow, here's some that I can do this, too, and they're dedicated to it. It's not something that's abstract. This is something that's going to affect this, the future of these young people's lives.

Justin Angle Yeah. How would you advise people hearing this or just people in general who sort of feel compelled to to maybe want to try to get involved in this space? And what you what first steps should people take?

Conrad Anker The initial step is made is living a purposeful life. So doing what you can to minimize your travel, being mindful of the type of food you consume and its impact on the planet, and doing the best you can, recycling. And we get that. And we're moving towards that but the way our economy functions and the market externalities that are beneficial and detrimental to both the carbon industry and the renewable industry are the result of legislative action. So to get the ball moving and to get the flywheel of innovation under foot and to get ideas going, we need market externalities that support renewable energy and climate awareness. And the only way we can work that out is through the ballot box. I mean, we are a democracy. And so having leaders that identify these as a as an extension, as an existential threat to humanity, both in the near term, — now use near term is 40 years, in the long term, as in two hundred years— having those type of elected officials will help us sustain the health of this planet. We have to save the planet so we can save humanity. And finding that balance between a carbon intensive lifestyle, which we all live, and we're all guilty of and we're all living to benefit, and to make that transition to a a less impactful life sounds. And

that whole transition is happening as we speak. And we and it's the saying is we are the first generation to completely understand the effects of anthropogenic climate change and quite possibly could be the last generation to create effective change. So every day we dilly-dally here in 2020, the effect in 40 years would be a lot, a lot more profound. And so the way I look at this from a climate standpoint, a metaphor analogy, if we will, and it's like, well, I always get up early and I'm like, get going earlier than. Everyone says, oh, we started three, I'm like, well let's start at two.

Justin Angle Exactly.

Conrad Anker It drive my climbing partners nuts, but they all know that's my M.O. Because 15 minutes in the morning at the dark can be an hour in the evening when you're tired and late and getting ahead of things like that. So that preparedness is something that we need to bring into a into a societal perspective.

Justin Angle Conrad, it's been a pleasure. I've enjoyed learning more about your world view, your approach to life, and great thanks for spending some time with us today.

Conrad Anker And thank you, Justin. And even though we're three hours and 15 minutes away from each other, from Missoula to Bozeman, we're in the same state. And I can't wait to meet up with you and go for a trail run. And yeah, may the the anxiety of the where we are right now in 2020 and the stress that the global pandemic has created. Let's collectively use this as a way to look at life through a purpose-driven perspective of what is important to us and how we interact with our fellow humans. And that's there's whenever there is something challenging or difficult, there's there's

a there's a lesson in there. We just have to be open to understanding it and seeing it and listening to it.

Justin Angle Absolutely, that's well put. Thank you, Conrad.

Conrad Anker Justin, thank you and thanks listeners for tuning in and in for an hour of your time. Appreciate it.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. We're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from University of Montana Alums, Michelle and Loren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications, and the University of Montana's College of Business. With additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee, and Montana Public Radio. Aj Williams is our producer, VTO, Jeff Amott and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot, and see you next time.