

Interviewee: Jim Puckett

Affiliation: Asia Pacific Environmental Exchange

Interviewer: Miguel Bocanegra

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Interview Summary:

Jim Puckett, director of the small, Seattle-based group Asia Pacific Environmental Exchange (APEX), wants to draw attention to environmental damage caused by the WTO, and to create an alternative economic model. The group's Basel Action Network project addresses issues related to toxic trade, including the dumping of toxic technologies, products and wastes in developing countries. Puckett, who previously worked with Greenpeace, says the WTO conference gave APEX a unique opportunity to educate local activists and media representatives on issues of globalization and the problems of traditional economic models. Puckett says APEX brought mainstream groups and direct action-oriented groups together, and used the Internet to distribute reports on toxic issues internationally, but did not effectively mobilize people of color. Puckett says the WTO protests offered environmental activists a chance to coordinate many different types of activists, including faith-based organizations and Labor organizations.



MB

This is Miguel Bocanegra. I'm here with Jim Puckett at the Panzanella Café. It is 11 am. Jim Puckett is the Director of APEX, Asia Pacific Environmental Exchange.

Can you trace some of the significant points that led towards the WTO protests, that APEX participated in in the WTO protests?

JP

Well, APEX is a very small organization first of all. It only employs at the moment two persons, myself, Jim Puckett, and my colleague, Dave Batker. I have a great deal of experience working on issues of international toxics campaigns, globalization of the toxics crisis, and we have a project in APEX called Basel Action Network which works specifically on issues of toxic trade, the dumping of toxic technologies, toxic products and toxic wastes on the developing countries, primarily.

So that's kind of my angle. My colleague, Dave Baxter, is an ecological economist and has had a great deal of experience working, actually, within the World Bank, around the World Bank with Greenpeace, is a strong critic of the World Bank and the IMF and traditional economic models.

So, together we formed APEX. When we discovered that the WTO was coming to Seattle, we felt like we had won some kind of lottery. It was very exciting, because we were one of the very few organizations in Seattle that had the international experience, both with environmental issues and with economics. We thought it was going to be an excellent opportunity for not only Seattle, but for our organization and for our chances to raise awareness of some of the issues that were important to us here in Seattle.

One of the things we've struggled with in Seattle is that so much of the work is very locally focused. It does not take a global view when it comes to activities. Foundations do not fund international activities here in Seattle, and we thought this was going to be a fantastic opportunity to really raise awareness not only of the people that were coming to Seattle for this event, but for the city and for the activists here.

So we saw our unique role as being here well in advance of the masses that were going to descend on Seattle. We were here for a period of time where we could first educate local activists on the issues of globalization and the problems of globalization and the traditional economic models, but also moreover to educate the press and therefore educate the public at large. We saw that we had this amazing opportunity, because once everybody came here in November, it was going to be a complete zoo, and our small organization would be lost in all of the circus that was going to take place.

But before that, we had an opportunity to really do workshops and to do events, press conferences, meet with editorial boards, and do what we eventually did which was a public advertising campaign to raise awareness of local citizens of what's at stake and what it meant for local communities, for the Northwest, how these issues played out, how the WTO really played out in your own lives - that was what we wanted to do.

And we had a timeframe which was much more relaxed than all the other groups, because they were just coming in for one week. We had many, many weeks to get the Seattle community up to speed and to start planting these little seeds of doubt, because most people always thought trade was a wonderful thing. Trade has a great connotation as a word. It's always seen as being beneficial when, in fact, there are horrific sides to the trade picture which we wanted to show.

Another philosophy we had was that, as APEX, in the many years we worked in Greenpeace, my colleague and I both worked in Greenpeace before this, and we learned that this whole game is about educating the public, trying to get the mainstream to shift. We were not interested in converting the converted, not into preaching to ones that already believed that globalization sucked. We wanted to get out there to people, even the people that hardly read at all. First, we wanted to get to those that would have access to newspapers,

but then we also wanted to have an aspect of our education campaign which ended up being the billboards and bus signs that we did, that we organized, which would just give a much more subliminal, conscious-raising message in a very short, concise way that a billboard advertisement can do, to plant those seeds of doubt in the public's mind.

I think we weren't alone in this. We were working with a lot of other groups and got more and more Seattle people interested on board, groups like EarthJustice and Friends of the Earth, locally, and a lot of the environmental groups started coming on board. The Labor movement was always there, very strong, the Labor movement. But we were all working on this together.

We had a lot of frustrating coalition meetings in the beginning, because nobody really knew what to do at these meetings. We sat there and planned and planned and planned and it became clear to APEX at a certain point that it's time to just start doing the work. The planning was getting a little bit ridiculous, the debates over whether we were going to be reformists or completely anti-WTO. These debates were getting to be counterproductive.

So we just said, "Well, these are our things we want to do and we're going to do them. We're a small group. We'll go ahead." What we did was a series of reports, and each of these were released with a press conference on different aspects of the WTO. The one I authored was, of course, the one on toxics and how it relates the WTO to public health issues. We released those well in advance of the meeting so that at least the Seattle press was covering this issue. Every week or so we would have another hit of issues that was making the WTO be at least questioned by the public and by journalists.

I think it really had a major impact. So many of the people that hit the streets on the WTO week were from this area. If we had had this type of education campaign in every city in the United States, it would have been tremendous. But the public of Seattle, thanks to the journalists that helped out really putting the story out there, they didn't boycott our critiques at all. They covered every issue, and thanks to that effort, the public in Seattle really had a huge education that was, unfortunately, it doesn't happen everywhere. Most of the cities only got to read about the protests and they didn't really understand what it was all about, most of the public.

But I think in Seattle and in this region, people really went up a notch in their educational level of what the issues were and what kind of things people were protesting about. So I think that was a major impact that was underestimated was how many people from Seattle, the mainstream folks, people from the Eastside, people, housewives, were out there marching. That was, I think, we contributed to that, and a lot of others did as well.

But that's what we saw our role as being, is trying to make the mainstream public shift just a little bit, and start moving in that direction incrementally so that we can hopefully completely revamp how trade takes place on the planet and who's going to be calling the shots, who's going to be making the trade agreements, and who's going to be at the negotiating table.

So specifically what we did was, we did release these reports, and they went out both to an international release as well as a local release, so we got some international press on it as well as local press. And then we pulled together this unprecedented billboard campaign, which saw, I think, we had about 15 different billboards from issues from animals rights, labor, environment, farms, covering the gamut.

What we did was we organized this campaign. We designed the common theme which is WTO, but what are we trading away? And then we would have a different issue – our forests, democracy, workers' rights, and showing that, just planting those seeds of doubt. It wasn't like slamming the WTO right in the face, because I think most people would have turned off to that, most of the mainstream. But just questioning, getting people to start creating a debate that the WTO and trade is not always a beneficial model.

So that was our contribution, I think. We were involved from the very beginning in all the coalition meetings and saw how that developed. I think we learned a lot from that, because there was a lot of spinning of the wheels going on and for the longest time it looked like, "Are we ever going to get traction? Are we ever going to really start living up to what this meeting really means?" I think in the end we did, but it was all like a mad scramble toward the end.

MB

Can you talk a little bit about the difficulties with those earlier coalition meetings?

JP

There were all kinds of tensions in building the coalition effort. Some of them, for example, the huge one was whether or not to call the local group "No To WTO" or "People For Fair Trade." There was a whole bunch of people that wanted the more reformist, positive name and message. "We are not going to stop trade; we are going to change the WTO." And then there was the other group that said, "No. We want to just blast them out of the water. Absolutely no WTO."

This became a counterproductive debate for too long. Finally, we just said, "Let's go with two names." Both names are going to sit on the same window of the same building, and that's what eventually happened, and everybody was fine with it in the end. But it wasted an enormous amount of debate and time among the NGOs.

There was also a tension - NGOs, Non-Government Organizations, activists - there was also a tension between the Washington groups and the local groups. The groups from Washington, D.C. are the ones that work on these issues most of the time, year in and year out, whether they be the environmental Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth. Then there's also a group down in San Francisco, the Globalization Forum. Those groups saw this whole issue as their bailiwick. And also Public Citizen, of course, in Washington, D.C.

So there was a great deal of tension about who was really running the show. I think some felt belittled by the Washington groups that we, in the Northwest, didn't really know what we were doing, etc. So that was another tension.

And there was also pervasive in the environmental community, there was the more mainstream environmental groups that didn't want to ever really come out hard against the WTO, but wanted to just raise the debate quietly, didn't really have the politics of a real, solid analysis of globalization, were very cautious. And then there were a few groups that were much more hard-nosed and wanted to really go after them. So that was a little bit of the tension we saw in the environmental community where certain foundations would only fund certain work, and had a very, very cautious approach to the WTO, because they get a lot of corporate funding, a lot of corporate connections.

So we saw that happening. But what we were trying to do all the time was say, "Listen. We're in the very beginning of this very large campaign or battle to change the system, and right now, the bigger the tent we build and the more people that can fit under it, the better. If we can get those housewives in Kirkland and Bellevue and Issaquah, that's fantastic. If we can get people in the South of Seattle, that's fantastic."

I think one of the places we did fail pretty badly in the end was connecting with the people of color community in this region and getting them out there in the streets. A lot of people of color and Southerners came from elsewhere around the world, but getting the local black community, for example, African-American community, to the streets, I think we didn't accomplish that well enough at all. I think it was irrelevant to their cause, and that was a mistake in retrospect. It could have been better.

But what was accomplished with beyond most people's expectations, so I don't think there were too many complainers. A lot of issues were raised, and it was a real protest of substance. It wasn't just a nebulous protest where people were screaming in the streets and nobody was quite sure what they're screaming about, which is unfortunately what some of the more recent protests have looked like. This one was one that, at least to the public of Seattle, they really understood that there were reasons for protests.

MB

So can you talk a little bit more about some of the tactics going in, because your organization focused mostly on working with the media and trying to get billboards and trying to get campaigns. Were there any local educational...?

JP

Yes. We were the first organization to hire anybody to work specifically on the Seattle WTO. We hired a student. You might know Robin Denburg, and had him go out in the community and do a lot of workshops with local groups, talk to the media, help with the organizing of press events that we did, all of these report releases. He was also very good at liaising with the City Council. We started getting the City Council very much up to speed to the point where they actually said that they were in support of what the protesters were in support of, which was quite phenomenal for a City Council hosting the WTO to have, I think it was like, a majority. I'm not sure, exactly, what the final count was, but a majority of the City Council said they would be in the streets protesting, which was quite amazing. That was largely because Robin and others were in there educating them, feeding them information about what was at stake.

So it was a huge learning process, and I think we really succeeded. Where that will take us now is the big question for Seattle and for the whole world, whether these protests are going to keep the kind of substantive quality that this one had or whether they're just going to diffuse into general screaming sessions about whatever issues happen to be in people's minds.

I think that was the very unique thing about Seattle is that not only were we able to bring a lot of mainstream groups and more direct action-oriented groups together, everybody had a piece of the large puzzle, including organized Labor. That was phenomenal. For the very first time we really saw Labor groups talking about environmental issues and environmental groups talking about Labor issues in their press statements and sound bites, etc. We really saw that coming together that was envisaged for a long time but never really had happened. That has been truly a unique thing.

But I think the other thing that I hope isn't unique is that the protests in Seattle really had clear issues laid out. People, with just a minimal of effort, could find out that there really was a substance to the protests, that it wasn't just a general screen.

MB

Were there any difficulties working with the mainstream media, because I know during the week of the WTO protests, one of the main criticisms was that there was no report by the mainstream media, the local media, of any of the substance of the protests, that they focused on some of the events, breaking windows.

JP

You have to cover that. If there's violence, it's going to get covered. If there's shutting down of buildings, it will get covered. We knew that that would

happen during the week. That's why it was so important to do the substantive debates ahead of time, in this area, at least, in the Seattle area and the Northwest. We knew that there was likely to be a lot of very dramatic activity, which some of us were part of, and some weren't.

So I don't blame the media for that, really. I do blame them for some of the coverage. I don't think they ever did things which would have been responsible to do, like really give a good coverage of the march and do aerial photographs to show the scope of the march. I was very disappointed that it didn't really reveal to the world how many people were on the streets. It focused in on the teargas and the broken windows.

It didn't show that this was very much a mainstream protest to my satisfaction. That's the kind of thing that sways the world is when the mainstream middle class sees that their Seattle participants are in there protesting, as well, so people in Cincinnati say, "Whoa. This isn't just a bunch of rabble-rousers. There's me out there protesting. There's my Labor union." When they see that, and that, unfortunately, did not get conveyed as well as it could have been, I felt.

But I don't blame the media for really focusing in on what was happening on the streets. It was intense. It was dramatic. It made the issues that were on the table go so much farther than they would have if there hadn't been dramatics, so all of it worked very well together.

At some point we were a little bit scared that it was all just going to melt down into an ugly scene, and even though there were ugly components to it, in the end they contributed to getting the message spread farther and wider than it ever would have.

I went immediately after the event, I had to go to a meeting on toxics issues in Europe, a big intergovernmental conference. And so right after the WTO conference, I jumped on a plane and went to Europe. People there were saying, a very straight-laced, suit and tie kind of people at this meeting, were saying, "Oh. It was just horrible. The violence that we saw." I said, "Oh, yeah. Some people broke windows." They said, "No. No. Not the violence of that, but the police violence." They said, "It was just horrifying to us that the police would do this to a protest."

So for the world audience, the message was that the police in Seattle really overreacted and actually legitimized the cause of the protestors.

MB

Did you use the Internet at all?

JP

Did we what?

MB	Use the Internet?
JP	Yes. We used it for our international releases. That's how we put out our press release, internationally. I have these networks that I tie into, and these things go out all over the world.
MB	How did that work using these to try to get this information out? Do you think that was...?
JP	Also we had our website, so that when we would release a report, people from all over the world could pull it down and grab it and make it theirs. Print it out fairly easily. So the Internet is just invaluable in globalizing, so to speak, activism. It's just amazing. I spend, and not just during the WTO, but in my normal work, I spend about 60 percent of my time with Internet interactions. We're able to reach out to the whole planet that way, to activists in every country now. Nobody – almost every activist, even in the poorest countries, has access now. It's quite phenomenal. So, yes, we used it specifically in the WTO to help spread the information that... We were primarily focused, our releases, at the Seattle press, but always with a mind to putting it out internationally, as well.
MB	Has the Internet affected the way you do politics as far as organizing to run the WTO? Do you think it would have been different had you not had access as far as educational campaigns?
JP	You're able to reach so many more people. You're able to form coalitions without even having sat down with people. In a lot of my other work, we do campaign work on international toxics issues by forming coalitions internationally just on the Internet. We will draft documents together. Right now I'm working on something with somebody in Australia, South Africa, and here in Seattle and a few other places in the world. We're all working on things together. I just put out a press release denouncing some toxic dumping from Australia to South Africa. This would have been really difficult a few years ago. So the Internet is invaluable for activism on global issues. We used it primarily for dissemination during the WTO. People would then write us and say, "We'd like to look at that report. Send us a hard copy." And we'd say, "Well, you can pull it down from the website." So it just makes the spread of information so much easier and faster.
MB	What do you think the next steps in organizing around the WTO are?

JP

That's a really good question. There are a lot of different angles that can be taken now. Specifically what we want to do is, like my colleague Dave Batker is working on, alternative economic models so we can start promoting an alternative to the WTO. Right now we're seeking funds from major donors and foundations to put together alternative economic models and to actually make a big splash with this alternative in the press, again, of always having a press component so that we can get the word out.

So we're toying with the idea of having a major prize given, like similar to the Nobel Prize, for the group or individual that can draft the alternative economic model that is most acceptable to a broad range of groups. Some of the ideas we're working on.

My work, specifically, I discovered something when I was drafting this toxics report, which was quite an eye-opener to me on the very specific issue of toxics. But I realized that some of the banned chemicals around the world, chemicals that are targeted for phase-out, like DDT and PCBs or petro-ethyl lead and gasoline, these are really nasty, horrible chemicals that people want to ban, asbestos, another substance... The WTO is trying to lower the tariffs on these very same chemicals. In other words, they will make it easier to buy them. They will increase consumption by lowering the tariffs, and nobody is looking at these kind of issues on the chemical sector.

People are starting to look at these issues on the forest products sector for liberalizing trade. Liberalizing trade in chemicals that the world wants to ban – this is absolutely insane. That just shows that the two communities have been completely isolated from one another; the corporate community and the activists community or the consumer-oriented community, they're not talking to each other. It just demonstrated to us so clearly that there's a major role for a confrontation here, which just started to happen in Seattle, the coming together thing... "Hold on, now. What are you guys doing? There are things in the world more important than trade in the market, much more important, and you're not taking those into account when you draft these treaties under the WTO."

So we're going to be doing a lot closer look into the chemicals sector and showing that the World Trade Organization is actually helping spread poison around the planet.

MB

Do you think APEX or even yourself learned anything or developed through the process of organizing around the WTO?

JP

We learned a lot about it, how you can spin your wheels in planning, planning, planning. There were too many meetings in the early stages of 1999, too many meetings sitting around and saying, "This is what we've got to do. This is what we've got to do."

It really woke me up to the fact that you've just got to start doing it. Start filling the vacuum. Start getting to work and people will come on board, and that's extremely important. People were very hesitant to make moves because they didn't want to step on toes and didn't know where exactly to find the resources and how to spread the wealth if there was any wealth to spread.

Too many of these questions were ultimately resolved by people just starting to get to work. The overriding issue, the importance of the issue, the WTO finally compelled people to start working together as November crept up on us, getting closer and closer. We said, "Let's go. We've got to get to work here."

Public Citizen, they've been criticized a lot for their mode of operation. I think the most valid criticism is they kind of blew into Seattle and then blew out again without leaving too much of any kind of thing left behind to keep the work going. But they've got to be absolutely credited for the fact that they're the ones that finally came in with the strong organization people, and also the money. Everybody kept looking for money. They're the only ones who came through with it in the end.

So Public Citizen, I think, has to be applauded. I know they've been criticized, but I think without them it would have been real chaos, because they did provide an anchor to all the activities and provided basic funds for holding things like rallies toward the end and press activities, etc. So they were key.

MB Do you think the organizations involved in organizing the WTO, that the style was different than earlier activists' roles?

JP The style?

MB Yes, the organizing style with the protests?

JP I think everybody brought their own style to play, and there was a huge array of styles. And I think what is unique, maybe, is that everyone appreciated the fact that they may not use that tactic or that style, but there was a general appreciation and respect for all the different tactics, from fairly mainstream tactics for the people that actually had credentials and went into the meeting and tried to change it from within, to the people doing direct action on the street.

I think there was respect for a large array of tactics that had not been seen before, very mainstream groups actually said things in support of the direct actions and in support of the people on the street shutting down the buildings. The only group that I think did not receive respect is the ones that tried to co-op the meetings by going around and breaking windows when that wasn't the

general sentiment of the people, the small contingent that wanted to create the pictures of violence and property destruction.

And I don't think, if you were to do a survey, that they had the respect of the broad base. But the direct action of shutting down the conference, trying to close the meeting in a peaceful, non-violent, direct actions, the banner hangings, I think all of that had a great deal of respect, because it was done with substance and respect for the city and the people.

MB In the educational campaign, was there any different styles than earlier in earlier activist campaigns?

JP What was fantastic was having... One thing that was wonderful about all these planning meetings was having.....(End of tape) ... I was saying that the thing that was very exciting was the coming together of all these different types of activism, from church-based, faith-based organizations, from right based organizations, Labor organizations, environment. And within each of those communities, environment community, Labor community, there was the tension between the fundamentalist anti-WTO people and ones that were more reformist. Yet we weathered that tension. We went through it and went out the other side with a real critique, with a very strong, important debate. We didn't let it get us down in the end.

But there were struggles within the Labor side and within the environment side of how far our statements would go about the WTO, how hard-nosed people would be about the critique. But in the end, it all came together in a very nice way. Everybody respected all the different pieces of the puzzle.

MB That's pretty much all the questions. So thanks a lot.

JP It's hard to go back to that time. It's been a few months already.

End of Interview

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