

Q & A WITH ERIC DE PLACE

TWA members and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.

*This month's feature: **Eric de Place**, the policy director of the Sightline Institute.*

Writing in *The News Tribune* in recent weeks about Tacoma's role in future fossil fuel transport, Eric de Place, the policy director of Seattle's Sightline Institute, outlined his findings at a recent presentation at the University of Washington Tacoma.



Q: How would you describe your work?

A: I spend time thinking about the world in terms of systems and, specifically, the Pacific Northwest region (with) its own history and dynamics and analyzing Northwest energy, economic, and environmental policies. I come from a family—four generations worth—that came to the region for rural resource work. My grandfather and his grandfather settled in southern Oregon Scandinavian logging communities. I began a Ph.D. in philosophy but could not marry it to being connected to the world. So I came to the Northwest and to this work 14 years ago never thinking I would have any job for this long. It allows me to be able to work on pieces of the Northwest's future.

Q: What keeps you awake at night?

A: These are fascinating times and ones of historical consequence for the region. We have previously had blood on the floor from disagreements about salmon and timber. This critical time forces us to decide whether to be an exporting arm of the fossil fuel industry or to double down on a creating a reputation for clean energy. This calls into question our future identity and how the next generations will live. Whatever we do, it will reverberate globally. We are the pinch point between the oil fields and Asia. The oil industry brings significant money and will use it to ensure the former option happens. So people are squaring off again.

Q: What is your role in this tension?

A: I am not an activist by nature ... I am a researcher. I consider systems and tradeoffs. The work has dragged me into the question about oil and to sometimes serve as a voice for offsetting fossil fuel projects. Besides the research, I do public speaking. I am not in a kayak blocking a rig, though I know and respect those people. It is my hope that my work can assist them, possibly serving as a corrective. I feel an obligation to be actively engaged in the questions raised at this time, particularly around existing and potential environmental

damage—even if you take the effects on climate away from the argument. The questions are not an academic exercise.

Q: Is this an either/or issue? Do you advocate completely moving away from fossil fuels?

A: No, it is a spectrum. Some projects we simply no longer need. Coal is a good example; it is not economically viable. Oil trains did not exist prior to 2012. Many other fuel sources are more complicated, requiring transitioning in an orderly fashion to something better, for example powering marine vessels with liquefied natural gas.

Q: What about methanol?

A: We have an incomplete picture there. We need to poke hard at our assumptions about it. There have been significant technological changes, so using the older models of thinking about it may not apply. This needs hard scrutiny.

Q: Can partnerships or collaborations between/among industries or organizations or locales have a role in solving these issues?

A: I've learned that sometimes collaboration is a way of maintaining the status quo, of protecting access, and maintaining what is not working. In my view, our region may be too collaborative. Once you have established dysfunctional pathways, they can be difficult to unravel.

Q: What prompted your interest in including Tacoma/Pierce County in your research?

A: I have been studying oil trains since 2012. Tacoma plays a key role in the industry because of its geography and location on Commencement Bay, so it is a part of my research. I don't pretend to know what local needs are and want to be sensitive to those.

Q: Have there been any watershed moments for you related to the work?

A: Yes. This past August my family and I were in Twisp on the same windy day three firemen were unfortunately lost to the wildfires. A fire came down the hill to where my 6-year-old son and I had been throwing a football. The local sheriff approached to instruct us to evacuate immediately without taking any possessions. I realized later that it is the locals who take it on the chin in these instances. Many farmers in that region are ruined, having been hit twice in two years. On a personal level, although this was my initial time being evacuated, I understood for the first time that due to the trends in our climate, my son may have to learn to run from environmental disaster in his lifetime and that he may not be able to dig clams, fish, or swim in rivers.

Q: What kinds of positive changes can you imagine happening?

A: Currently we are having debates about the wrong things—seawalls, reservoirs, how large coal terminals should be. I look forward to those involved in the critical questions getting more comfortable exercising different muscles—those of opportunity, responsibility, and power. The

way we must deal with climate change is via the physical world, i.e., the infrastructure that moves carbon commodities to points of possible combustion.

Q: Is the kind of change you describe happening anywhere?

A: Five hundred people turned out in Hoquiam to discuss that city's role in oil transport. Public opinion has shifted dramatically there. The most surprising thing to me is the effect the public can actually have on the questions communities are currently facing about what kind of future they want for themselves.