

FORUM

Discussing international education



ROBERT SWAN'S MISSION IMPOSSIBLE
MADRID CONFERENCE REPORT
THE RECESSION AND EDUCATION
REBUILDING RWANDA

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Robert Swan is a man on a mission. Some say his quest is impossible but to him it is just another adventure; another challenge to overcome. Swan is a polar explorer, environmental leader and the first man ever to walk to both the North and South poles. He has dedicated his life to the preservation of Antarctica.

Elise Kuurstra, EAIE Communications Manager, sat down with Mr Swan the day after his electrifying keynote speech at the 21st Annual EAIE Conference in Madrid, to discuss the role that international educators can play to spread his important message.

Photography: R Koopmans (iStock), Gregorio Reche,
Video stills courtesy 2041



Why was it appealing for you to come to the EAIE conference?

RS: I believe that we have about ten years remaining in which we can still turn the ship of our planet and our participation here on earth around. We can't change everything overnight but we need to turn our attitudes towards energy and sustainability. We are using about four planets' worth of resources at the moment to sustain what we are doing. We only have one planet. For this reason, I'm eager to be involved in anything to do with education and young people. What I really liked about this conference was the enthusiasm of the team. Without being arrogant, I am invited on average to two conferences a day. It was the EAIE team that attracted me because if the team is good then there will generally be good follow-through.

What role do you think international educators can play in support of sustainable development?

RS: It is really important for educators and universities to walk the talk. I wonder how many people who flew to the EAIE conference from around the world off-set their flights? How many people actually complained about the non-reusable plastic bottles they were given during the conference? Probably very few. What are educators doing at their own universities? Are their universities sustainable? Are they reducing their carbon footprint? Are they themselves showing leadership at the university? That's the first thing they can do because any student attending the university will see this and then it becomes a more natural process to actually bother about the planet. Looking after our world is a technical challenge so my hope is that universities will focus more on the technical side of

What is 2041?

In the year 2041 the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty could potentially be modified or amended. The aim of Robert's Swan's 2041 organisation is to work towards the continuing protection of the Antarctic Treaty so that the last great wilderness on earth is never exploited. Visit 2041.com for more information.



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**WE'VE GOT AN EMERGENCY ON OUR HANDS. IT IS TIME FOR
UNIVERSITIES TO FOCUS ON THIS AND SHOW LEADERSHIP**

renewable energy, inspiring people to go out and create jobs and businesses. Let's be entrepreneurial about the planet's survival! At the same time, I hope they are also giving students the chance to use their creative skills like art and music to inspire others. We've got an emergency on our hands. It is time for universities to focus on this and show leadership.

Do you think educators are sufficiently informed to teach students about sustainability?

RS: Probably not. If they started listening more they would become more informed. I think it is terribly important for the EAIE to use its conference to get this message across and to get people focused on the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in December this year. This is a turning point for our planet. If we carry on sleepwalking it will only end in tears.

You mentioned in your keynote speech that our participants' students are your customers. What has impressed you most about the students you work with?

RS: A lot of students in developed nations, such as the United States, Canada, the UK and Europe have become a bit blasé and accustomed to information overload. What I've seen is tremendous enthusiasm from Asian students who come with us to the Antarctic. They haven't been overdosed by Facebook and MySpace. I don't blame students in the developed nations. I'm not surprised that they hide in Facebook. Everything else seems to move in their lives. It is important that we take that lesson from the Asian students who are enthusiastic about the cause and try to share this enthusiasm with students in developed nations. That is another reason why I was excited about this conference because it represents significant exchange between nations and a balancing act on an international level.

Can you explain to our readers what 'sustainable inspiration' is all about?

RS: Sustainable inspiration is what young people in developed nations need; it is lacking in many. So much is here today and gone tomorrow. Sometimes it feels like a sausage factory – you get this amazing thing that happens, everybody is attentive, it is in the news and then it moves through the news and disappears. Amazing things and terrible things happen but with all this input we gradually become desensitized. We become addicts to bad news. It isn't the media's fault; it is our fault for accepting it. I believe we need sustainable inspiration about issues which require long-term commitment and interest. That is why I know people love our 2041 mission. People come up to me with tears in their eyes and ask to be part of it for the years to come. Sustainable inspiration is missing. I want to make sure to say that this is not the fault of young people. I feel sorry for young people that they are being bombarded with so much information that they become desensitized and say "whatever". Educators can play a role in changing this.

You've walked to the North and South poles, traveled around the world, received the Order of the British Empire from the Queen. Looking back, do you have any regrets about anything you've done?

RS: Yes, I regret that I didn't stop more to celebrate the special moments in my life. It is very easy to run through life and then wake up one morning and think: "Oh no, so that was the whole thing, was it?" I regret not having stopped enough to celebrate those great moments of achievement. I just moved on to the next one. I'm dealing with that now and I've just written a book, which has really made me stop to realise that we've had some incredible achievements that I had not really thought about before.



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Robert Swan at the Madrid conference

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Video footage of a 2041 Antarctic clean-up

LET'S BE ENTREPRENEURIAL ABOUT THE PLANET'S SURVIVAL

What would you regard as your greatest achievement?

RS: I haven't done it yet. The greatest achievement will be to be happy. I have yet to be so. I've gotten so wrapped-up in what I'm doing that I've forgotten about my own happiness. But I'm working on that now!

Do you equate happiness with contentment?

RS: You have to be a restless person to do what I've done. I'm working on it though because there are a lot of good people who are dead and they shouldn't be dead. If I carry on doing what I do, I'll probably die a bit too early which would be selfish to my son who is 15. So I am working on cutting back a bit but at the same time it makes me so cross that the world is walking into a situation where your children and my son's children will seriously wonder what drugs we were on. We can't carry on telling one another that we don't have a problem. **E**

**ANTARCTICA 2041:**MY QUEST TO SAVE THE EARTH'S
LAST WILDERNESS
By Robert Swan

In *Antarctica 2041* Swan details his personal experiences with the effects of climate change, and his firm belief that humans can reverse the harm done to the planet thus far. An upbeat call to action, his book provides the information people need to understand the world's crisis, and the tools they need to combat it, ultimately showing us all that saving Antarctica amounts to saving ourselves.

— *Random House, Inc.*