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An Interview with Jonathan Bloom

STEPHANIE FOOTE

Jonathan Bloom is a journalist, consultant, and thought leader on the topic of food waste. Jonathan wrote the book *American Wasteland* and created the blog *Wasted Food*. He has spoken on food waste, from San Francisco to Santiago to Singapore, and consulted with the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, Harvard Law School, Natural Resources Defense Council, and General Mills. In 2013–2014 he was the O. V. W. Hawkins Expert-in-Residence at Bucknell University. A Boston native, Jonathan now lives in Durham, North Carolina, with his wife, two sons, and many, many containers for leftovers.

sf: One of the things we admire about your work is that you chose first to blog the research and the ideas that eventually ended up in *American Wasteland*. We've been reading *Wasted Food* since late 2007—almost from the beginning—and it seems as though you found your voice very quickly. That's not always easy to do in the blogosphere, and yours is one of the environmental blogs that really attracted a lot of attention and set a very high bar for other bloggers.

We're wondering what drew you to blogging and how you learned to navigate the limits and the possibilities of the genre. For example, we're thinking about bloggers we know who describe how difficult it can be to craft eloquent posts regularly, and it seems as though the pressure can really intensify the more readers you get.

jb: First of all, I appreciate the compliment, although I'm not so sure that I've raised any bars.

I can't say that I've ever felt much pressure in writing a blog post.

Blogging, like doing a radio interview from your home phone, doesn't feel too pressure packed. In addition, it's not as if I'm writing for hordes of readers. Let's face it—food waste is a niche topic.

I used to pay closer attention to the metrics and agonize over each visitor's length of stay, but I came to realize that people either like your site or they don't. And I believe that writing in an authentic voice and being, yes, transparent will increase the number of people who enjoy your blog, no matter the topic.

In terms of finding that voice, I definitely experimented a bit at the beginning. I started with the idea of *Wasted Food* being a behind-the-scenes look at writing a book. But that wasn't informational, didn't stand on its own, and involved too much navel gazing. I settled on this philosophy: write posts on subjects that I'd want to read in a friendly, informative tone. That mindset yields better posts, because the writing doesn't feel like a chore. The moment blogging becomes homework (or actual work), it usually morphs into a different entity.

sf: How did you find your place in the very crowded blogosphere? Did you find fellow bloggers fairly rapidly or build virtual (or even material, face-to-face) relationships with them? We're thinking in particular about how difficult it can be in the virtual world to differentiate between a public, an audience, and a community, which all have different ways of constituting themselves. The blogosphere can really blur those boundaries in interesting ways. Did your experience blogging change as you negotiated different ways of imagining your audience?

JB: Given how nichey food waste is, it was not difficult to find fellow bloggers and build a sense of virtual camaraderie, if not community. I have some friends online and some regular readers, and thinking of them helps on those days where the ideas aren't flowing. But I don't distinguish much between the public and my audience. The one place that arises is that I always try to keep a low barrier to entry—so to speak. That decision has minor impact on how I write a post—for example, I'll briefly explain what anaerobic digestion is or what the organization WRAP does.

My experience blogging has changed over the years, but not necessarily because of audience. My blog started as a means to an end—as a way to build “my platform” so as to get a book deal to write *American Wasteland*. Somewhere along the way, that changed, and I began to see

that an informational blog with some attention paid to the writing had value and, possibly, could have a permanent home in the blogosphere.

sf: We noticed that from very early on, your posts often referenced a question one of your readers had left in the comments section of a previous post. What are the sorts of things that you learned from commenters on your posts, and did those comments help you to see the general shape of what environmentally aware readers most wanted to learn about food waste or about waste in general?

JB: I certainly noticed what facets of the food-waste discussion most interested readers, and it influenced *Wasted Food* in subtle ways. For instance, I am fascinated by waste-reduction policies around the globe, but posts on those topics didn't prompt much discussion (and, most likely, interest). Accordingly, I've been conscious of not overloading on international news or policy.

Conversely, the "In Your Kitchen" posts prompt the most interest. Readers want to know what they can do—how can they trim their own waste. And simultaneously, the kitchen-savvy folks want to share their tips and tricks. Early on, I focused on providing a space for that knowledge sharing, allowing the experts to help those who enjoy gleaning this wisdom.

sf: What do you think is the relationship between local action or more traditional activism and the world of social media? Is it your sense, as some media critics have argued, that the blogosphere is preventing people from getting out there and doing things together in public, or do you find that people who are drawn to activist-oriented blogging (as bloggers or as readers) are more willing to participate in other forms of action that might mitigate large-scale food waste or provoke changes in the sort of "business as usual" thinking that comes with such a high environmental price?

JB: Some people get it out of their system by reading about it or writing their own comments. But the ones I hear from—and these are likely to be the more passionate segment of the readership—tend to be readers and doers. These are people who get excited and/or enraged by waste and set out to do something about it in their own lives or their communities.

Also, I occasionally get an e-mail or comment asking if I can rescue or redistribute some food that'd otherwise be tossed. Obviously, I can't physically help them, but I try to connect them with their local food bank or food-recovery organization. Those small wins are often the most rewarding.

sf: One of the things we most like about your blog and your book is how you balance an analysis of the relationship between local choices (What's in your refrigerator?) and bigger, more global analyses (How does your supermarket work?). What's your view of how paying attention to local choices can have an impact on larger structural problems?

jb: I think we're all self-motivated creatures, in both positive and negative ways. More people would be interested in a post like "How you can save \$20 this week by not wasting food," than one on how our nation could save \$5 billion. I believe that getting readers to start asking questions will prompt them to see the waste all around them. Hopefully they will ask questions like, How much food am I discarding this week? Why am I throwing away so much food?! How much money did that represent? What's the environmental impact?

And then they may begin thinking or asking similar questions about what their supermarket does with its excess food or why the city or town isn't composting that food waste. And hopefully the food-waste waste awareness radiates out from there to encompass the national and global implications.

sf: We've been reading a lot of books about food and food culture in the United States—books about farming, about agribusiness, about obesity, and a lot of books about how Americans need to learn to cook again. What's your take on why food is now such a powerful site for people to come to environmental thinking?

jb: We all eat. Food is a great medium for communicating or teaching any subject because of its universality. And it will remain so until we start getting our daily sustenance in pill form (and probably long after that, too).

But I would argue that the sustainable-food movement must do better in communicating food's environmental impact to individuals and

the media. For instance, take the recent Stanford study on organics. The mainstream media (and many individuals) completely got that wrong—to me, the main benefit of organic food isn't the increased vitamins or nutrients but the decreased amount of harmful stuff we're putting in our bodies, soil, and waterways.

Meanwhile, there's a segment of the population that's intensely focused on what agriculture does to the environment but then less so on larger issues like fracking or air pollution from road emissions. To a certain extent, that's green fatigue at work. But we tend to have a dangerous ability to compartmentalize.

SF: One of the interesting problems you point out in the book is that it's actually hard for consumers to make informed judgments anymore about what kind of food to choose. People don't know the difference between "use by" and "sell by" dates (and stores don't make it easy to know the difference either!). We're used to being able to get any kind of produce, even if it's not in season. And more interestingly, you describe how working at a grocery store revealed how food that is thought to be unattractive is simply not displayed or made available for sale. We liked your idea of having a place in the store where consumers could buy bruised fruit or weirdly shaped vegetables—a display where items that aren't picture-perfect could be put on sale for those who want them. But given your knowledge of how big-chain stores work, do you think that any of them would be amenable (or even be able) to make such changes in individual stores?

JB: There are some stores that have a discount-produce rack, but they are in the minority. And there's variation even within a chain, so some individual stores may have that kind of setup, while others do not. I can imagine a supermarket chain adopting this tactic throughout its stores as part of a larger waste-reduction scheme, but on its own it doesn't seem to generate much excitement within the supermarket industry.

SF: We're such fans of your book and your blog that we are, of course, interested in what comes next for you. Are you working on new projects about food, waste, or environmentalism? What do you think is the next big wave in environmental thinking that will get people to make changes in their lives?

JB: I've been wondering what's next for a few years now, and I'm just now coming to terms with that uncertainty. After completing the initial round of media for *American Wasteland*, I decided that I wanted to focus on food waste instead of jumping to another topic. I knew I wanted to help America become less wasteful. What exactly that meant was less clear.

When I started researching food waste, I was a journalist with a strong interest in reducing waste. These days, I'm an advocate who also writes. I give talks at colleges and conferences and consult with businesses to help them minimize their food waste. In addition, I'm exploring a new book project within the realm of food waste and contemplating an awareness-campaign idea.

I hope and believe that food waste can be that next wave in environmental thinking. I'm not entirely sure that waste reduction will catch on nationally, because it requires behavior change. Yet I'm confident that composting will be the next mainstream phase of recycling. It just makes too much economic sense. In twenty years we will be astounded that food was once the largest portion of the waste stream and that 97 percent of food scraps ended up in a landfill or incinerator. Of course, by then, we may have solved this whole problem with the advent of those sustenance pills . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Foote is a professor of English and gender and women's studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is a cofounder and coeditor of *Resilience*. In addition to numerous articles, she is the author of *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001) and *The Parvenu's Plot: Gender, Culture, and Class in the Age of Realism* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2014); the editor of two reprints of Ann Aldrich's classic 1950s lesbian pulps; and a coeditor, with Elizabeth Mazzolini, of *Histories of the Dustheap* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012). She is currently at work on a project on narrative and waste.