





By Matthias Gelber

# LOOKING FOR Greener Pastures

**G**rowing up in a West German village of 500 in the '70s, I was surrounded by nature's expansive beauty year 'round. I simply couldn't help becoming a "greenie"—someone who strives to make the planet a better place.

During childhood summers, I played in the woods, while winter meant three full months of skiing and snow sports. And, of course, school semesters taught me about the importance of nature, including the almost magical transformation of carbon dioxide into oxygen through photosynthesis. I started to realize how industrialization and pollution had negatively affected the balance of the environment.

We all take separate journeys to becoming professional speakers. For me, it started as a part-time lecturer at the university where I was employed as a research assistant. I started delivering modules on environmental management and accounting, which was an excellent way to gain confidence and exposure.

But let's be honest: ISO 14001 (the standard for environmental systems) is a dry topic, so my goal was to spice up the technical content with industry experiences and stories that would keep people entertained. In 1996, I delivered a five-day environmental management workshop in Indonesia with my boss from the university, and the feedback from my audience was positively invigorating. Could there be an international career waiting for me?

It became rapidly apparent that ISO 14001 was a wave, rolling into numerous opportunities to travel and share my knowledge. If there was to be a thrilling talk on ISO 14001, providing value to businesses and their corporate objectives, I wanted to be the one delivering it. Best of all, it simply required speaking about my passion—a deeply held belief that I was contributing to the greater good. The fact that I could do so in more than 30 countries over the course of five years was icing on the cake.

Matthias Gelber, named the "Greenest Person in the World," has spoken on his passion in 38 countries.

Gelber explains humans' negative impact on the environment.



Frank Furness, followed by one of his boot camps. My resulting signature talk, “The Day After Today,” alluded the title of the environmental-apocalypse film “The Day After Tomorrow.”

I drew on the days of my boyhood village for inspiration. As children, we would have three or more months of snow coverage each winter—while my brother’s children, the current generation, are lucky to get a couple of days of snow. Times have changed, and the weather patterns are different, in the span of just one generation. I can see, feel and touch the change in the place where I grew up and lived for more than 20 years.

Yes, there has been a natural fluctuation in the climate of the planet. But now, human hyper-action risks putting the natural balance of our ecosystem out of sync. These brief points illustrate the magnitude of the issue:

- Humans are currently adding 30 billion tons of carbon dioxide per year, though nature adds, absorbs and tends to keep a balance.
- The United Nation’s environmental program says that 85 percent of environmental impact comes from work-related travel.
- I estimate that speakers have three to 10 times higher environmental

impact than the “average Joe.”

- My annual CO2 emissions are around 20 tons—three times higher than the average person living in Malaysia!—but my electricity bill is only \$8 U.S. To counteract that, I participate in programs designed to capture hundreds of thousands of tons of carbon dioxide within the next few years.
- 97 percent of all climate experts agree that humans are the cause of current global warming.
- 2005 was the hottest year globally, and 2009 was the second hottest.

### Day After Day

My talks in recent years have been about climate change with the intention to motivate others to take practical action, control and responsibility over our actions. When I received the “Greenest Person on the Planet” Award by a Canadian organization called 3rdWhale, it opened

### Green in the Mainstream

In those days, speaking about the environment was not as mainstream as it is today. When I moved to Malaysia a few years ago, it was time to shift from technical and business arena into a wider field of environmental mobilization and inspiration. I attended a public talk by motivational speaker

### Calculating—and Mitigating—Your Footprint

Measuring is the starting point for properly understanding your carbon footprint as a speaker. Here are a few resources that can help:

- Calculate the emissions from your home, car, air travel and everything you use at [www.carbonfund.org/calculators](http://www.carbonfund.org/calculators)
- Calculate the carbon emissions from your economy and higher class air travel by entering your flight origination and destination cities at [www2.icao.int/en/carbonoffset/Pages/default.aspx](http://www2.icao.int/en/carbonoffset/Pages/default.aspx)

up doors, particularly with the media. However, I put my speaking career somewhat on hold to start another business with the goal to save 1 percent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions, by creating building materials that look and function like cement-based products, but mainly consist of recycled material. Cement manufacturing is responsible for 6 to 7 percent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions—more than double what airplanes emit.

As leaders and influencers, it is critical that we walk the talk. As speakers, we can make a positive impact by encouraging our audiences to go green. Simple props, like a reusable water bottle or a solar phone charger, can deliver a powerful message. I personally greened my lifestyle to ensure that I am absorbing more carbon dioxide than I am emitting. For example, I've invested in a tree plantation in Panama with a diverse range of local and

international hard wood. (The side benefit is that it will deliver me an eco-friendly pension income of \$800,000 U.S. in 15 to 20 years time.) I also launched a campaign, in collaboration with other parties, to get 1 million trees planted to restore a burned-down peat forest area in Malaysia. Peat, a meter deep of moist organic matter, is the world's most effective natural storage of carbon.

Mother Earth is amazing. She will survive, adjust and cope. But the real problem is that the human species, the animals, the diversity and our human-made assets are being threatened, and global agreements aren't going to solve the problem. We, as individuals, are. Wherever your journey as a speaker takes you, from tiny villages to the world's biggest cities, you can play a role by keeping your negative impact low and inspiring your audiences and event organizers to adopt green practices.



*An international professional speaker and businessman, Matthias Gelber received the annual award for "Greenest Person on the Planet" by 3rdWhale in Canada in 2008. Gelber has delivered speeches in 38 countries and is the co-founder of Maleki GmbH, a company specializing in low-carbon footprint and high-performance building materials that replace cement, which is responsible for approximately 6 percent of the world's CO2 emissions. Contact him at [Matthias@googlemail.com](mailto:Matthias@googlemail.com)*

- For a full cost comparison of various U.S.-based carbon-offset schemes, go to [www.ecobusinesslinks.com/carbon\\_offset\\_wind\\_credits\\_carbon\\_reduction.htm](http://www.ecobusinesslinks.com/carbon_offset_wind_credits_carbon_reduction.htm)
- I use a Thailand-based tree-planting charity to compensate for my air travel. I'm involved in its projects, and the money gets put to good use. For more information, visit [www.carbonfree.org.uk](http://www.carbonfree.org.uk)

## 10 Steps to Low-Impact Speaking

- 01 Inspire your audience to go green, which can have a greater positive impact than you can imagine while improving their businesses.
- 02 Work with your conference/event organizer to make the event green, carbon neutral or waste free.
- 03 Avoid flying when possible, and use alternative means of transport.
- 04 Link speaking events with one another—one journey for several speeches.
- 05 Eat low-carbon footprint and healthy food, such as local fruit and vegetables, while avoiding high-footprint red meat.
- 06 Check into green hotels—literally!
- 07 Follow the green guidance and suggestions of your hotel.
- 08 Connect with Mother Nature on the road. When did you last hug a tree?
- 09 Green your home with insulation, recycled material and low-energy appliances.
- 10 Think of future generations when making decisions.

