

# Urban planner suggests 'carbon is not the enemy'

November 15 2016, by Bob Yirka

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(Phys.org)—Architect, author and urban planner William McDonough has published a Comment piece in the journal *Nature* promoting his belief that it is time to change the way the word "carbon" is used in science and in society as a whole. He believes we all need to stop thinking of carbon as the enemy so that we can start to see it as simply another part of the natural world.

As McDonough notes, [carbon](#) is not inherently a bad thing, it is only in the way we have used it that it has come to be seen as an enemy. By burning materials that emit carbon into the atmosphere, we create [environmental harm](#). But labeling it as the enemy has led to confusion, he maintains—not only has it led to misunderstandings regarding its nature by the general public but in the way it is used to promote or argue against programs or ideas that are meant to support a cause. What does it mean to be carbon negative, for example, or carbon positive? Both terms can be used to support positive programs, such as Bhutan claiming its country should be considered to be carbon negative because its trees pull in more carbon than other sources emit. Meanwhile, some businesses claim to be carbon positive because they use carbon sequestering techniques.

McDonough suggests we switch to using the terms "fugitive carbon," "durable carbon" and "living carbon." The first is clearly the bad kind because it winds up in the atmosphere. The second comprises carbon locked into stone or coal, and the third describes carbon that is part of biological cycles—it is a necessary ingredient in soil, for example, and exists in the bodies of plants and animals.

What we need to do, he suggests, is learn to live harmoniously with carbon and to stop waging war on it. In practice, this would mean working with the carbon cycle—pulling carbon from the air, for example, to fuel biological processes, building soil carbon deposits to promote biological growth, regenerative farming and creating closed loops of carbon nutrients. The ultimate goal, he suggests, would be to use carbon as an asset in ways that do not cause other problems. He suggests the way to start is to make it a goal for all future designs be truly carbon positive, whether buildings, farms or entire cities.

**More information:** William McDonough. Carbon is not the enemy, *Nature* (2016). [DOI: 10.1038/539349a](https://doi.org/10.1038/539349a)

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