Dear friends in the Transition Movement:

As some of you know, I spend much of my time writing about the need to end global warming and help transform our planet to local economies. Therefore, of course, I’ve spent most of the last several months crisscrossing the globe by jet, which makes me a) a hypocrite, and b) tired. But I’ve done it because we’re trying desperately to organize a real grassroots global response to climate change—350.org, with its global day of action on Oct. 24.

One of the things I’ve found, on every continent, is the gathering strength of the Transition Town movement. Everywhere I go, word has gotten out—most recently I met with dozens of New Zealand transitioners, who are doing superb work. And in every case they’ve instinctively understood—better than most—what it is we’re trying to do with 350.org.

That mission, in a sentence, is to help people build a true and effective global movement from their own dispersed communities, and strengthen those communities as they do it.

350 is the most important number in the world—it’s what the climatologists tell us is the maximum safe amount of carbon in the atmosphere, measured in parts per million. But 350 is also the number that defines the possible future: low-carbon, local, liveable. I always tell people that fossil fuel has had one side effect almost as profound as climate change: it’s made us in the West the first of our species with no practical need of our neighbors. As we make the transition away from coal and gas and oil, we’ll also make the transition back to neighborliness—and not a moment too soon.

So we’d be very grateful if all you community-builders set one day -October 24, 2009- aside for a little global community building. On that day communities around the world will be figuring out endlessly diverse ways to push this number into the human consciousness, in the hopes that we can set a real bar for the Copenhagen conference that will happen in December. There will be climbers high in the Himalayas with banners, and 350 scuba divers underwater on the Great Barrier Reef; there will be big actions in big cities, and small actions in small ones. We need Transition Towns to be a big part of this movement.

Last year, when I was in the UK and had the pleasure of finally meeting Rob Hopkins after years of reading his work, here’s how he put it on the Transition blog:

*It is clear that 350 needs to be the number everyone thinks about in relation to climate change. This set me thinking about how we might weave it into the Transition movement. When I had to sum up at the end of the day, I commented that I thought that merely symbolic actions were not enough, and that there was no need for either/or, that there is no reason why Transition initiatives can’t do practical actions that also embody the 350 element.*

Some ideas that came to me included planting 350 walnut trees (or whatever), donating 350 local currency notes to something, creating 350 new allotments, installing 350 solar panels... producing an Energy Descent Plan that costs £350 a copy (that’s a joke that one…).

We know you’ll come up with the right thing for your spot, and that the pictures will add to what we hope will be a benign tsunami gathering around the world. Thank you much for building a world that works locally, and connecting it together into one that might just scrape by globally as well!

Bill McKibben for 350.org