

# TALKING TRASH WITH BILL MAHER

AND LOVING EVERY MINUTE OF IT!

**BY:** Mitch Hedlund

**PHOTOGRAPHY:** Cover and interior tuxedo images courtesy of Brian Bowen Smith/AUGUST  
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Bill Maher is a comedian, political commentator, satirist, the host of HBO's *Real Time with Bill Maher*, and one of the most iconic and outspoken figures in cultural affairs today. Whether you love him for his freedom of speech or despise him for his liberal political viewpoint, you have an opinion.

The point is however, that *he* has an opinion and as a personality, loudly voices it, creating a cult following in its wake. From *Real Time* and debating political issues at the round-table, to his Flip-A-District campaign ousting Minnesota Rep John Kline as a cruddy political candidate, Bill always incites conversation around topical subjects.

This is why as the Executive Director of Recycle Across America, I am thrilled he is joining our campaign to lend his voice to this critical issue and to discuss the subject of trash with him; including global waste, political and socio barriers, and the obvious yet everyday solutions that could easily make a difference. Bill has an innate ability to make the most controversial subject-matter more crystallized and relevant to the public, delivering his point of view with supported intelligence and rationale, while generating just enough acerbic wit to often cause guilt-ridden but endorphin releasing laughs.



**“THE U.S. GENERATES MORE TRASH PER CAPITA THAN ANY OTHER COUNTRY IN THE WORLD, SO WE HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO LEAD ON THIS ISSUE. WE NEED TO BE THE COUNTRY THAT CAN DEMONSTRATE HOW WE CAN SLOW DOWN RESOURCE DEPLETION AND CO<sup>2</sup> EMISSIONS, BY RECYCLING MOST OF THE WASTE WE GENERATE, AND STILL CONSUME THE MASSIVE AMOUNTS OF SH\*\* WE FEEL COMPELLED TO BUY IN THIS COUNTRY.”**

Bill is the perfect person to talk about trash and our ever-growing global problem of it. If I had to distill it down to one thing, what I appreciate most about him is his ability to make people feel uncomfortable. When we’re uncomfortable we think, we speak, we change, we act. Whether you view him simply as an antagonist or someone who flaunts his master debating skills, Bill takes issues that might otherwise be considered irrelevant or of disinterest in our comfy insulated U.S. lives, and throws them in our face with enough entertainment factor, disruption and substance to make us take notice, act, react, engage or even become enraged.

So why trash? Trash is a foundational issue that we can’t and shouldn’t ignore, and one of the most under-discussed yet necessary conversations. This begins with the misnomer that garbage goes into the ground and magically disappears. When it comes to recycling, there is no consistent messaging to help society recycle properly and therefore recycling is not thriving as it should be. As a result we have a *trash creep* that is choking our land, oceans, waterways, and sea life — literally, going beyond the obvious concerns of filling our landfills and polluting our waterways. And subsequently, we’re manufacturing new products and packaging using finite virgin materials, which are not only exhausting the planet’s resources, but in the process



Bill Maher interviewing President Jimmy Carter on Real Time With Bill Maher

depleting our fresh water and energy and expelling exponentially more CO<sup>2</sup> into the atmosphere than if we were to manufacture from recycled materials. We rely on a delicate and integrated system to survive on this planet; if the system fails then we all fail, and we’re getting plenty of warnings that the system is indeed failing. This is why the subject of trash is necessary to look at, talk about and act upon. It’s a critical issue for us all.

The very good news is that unlike many things outside of our control, the concerns with trash actually have a simple, proven, and readily available solution to act on today — it is a standardized labeling for recycling bins and the celebrity led communications campaign announcing the solution is called “Let’s recycle right!” This is a remarkably simple answer that could truly help turn this ship around, but we need an iconic voice to wake up society to this issue and to introduce them to the solution. Unfortunately it’s because of our tidy little communities where the trash trucks come down the street every Tuesday morning making everything disappear, that we don’t realize what a problem trash is. This is where Bill comes in . . .

**COCO ECO MAGAZINE:** As the satirical icon that wakes people up on subjects that matter, why do you think we need to talk about trash?

**BILL MAHER:** There’s too much of it and it feels like we’re drowning in it — especially when you hear news reports of trash

in the ocean being mistaken for a lost Malaysian airplane. There are reports that there are 58 million square miles of garbage floating in our oceans today.

If worldwide waste is expected to double in less than 11 years, and it will continue to double as our population grows, then we have to address this issue today. We’re all part of the problem — making about 4.5 lbs. per day per person in the U.S. It’s bad math when you think of the resources it takes to make that waste in the first place, and the fact that we’re letting so much of it go to waste.

Remember, most of the materials that we consider trash are valuable and can be used for manufacturing, if we recycle them. Recycling works, it’s proven, people get it and if it’s easy enough, they’re willing to do it. It solves so many problems related to air, water, energy usage, resources, CO<sup>2</sup> so we just need to do more of it and do more of it correctly. When we start making recycling a valuable part of our society, who will allow a can and a plastic bottle to go to waste in the ocean?

We need to get away from the mindset that it’s trash and really begin thinking of it as valuable stuff — no-one wants to throw billions of dollars of resources away every day, but in the U.S. that’s what we’ve been doing. The U.S. generates more trash per capita than any other country in the world, so we have an obligation to lead on this issue. We need to be the country that



**“ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIONS ARE PROVEN TO MAKE GOOD BUSINESS SENSE AND A NUMBER OF BIG CORPORATIONS ARE GETTING THAT NOW. BUT THE DUMB\*SS RIGHT WING CONTINUES TO PUSH THE ‘JOB’ BUTTON, GIVING THE IMPRESSION THAT YOU CAN’T HAVE JOB GROWTH IF YOU’RE PRO-ENVIRONMENT. IT’S LIKE SAYING WE SHOULDN’T CAPTURE SERIAL KILLERS BECAUSE WE DON’T WANT MORGUE WORKERS TO LOSE THEIR JOBS. THIS IS A DYNAMIC ECONOMY SO PEOPLE WILL ALWAYS LOSE JOBS; IT’S PART OF OUR SYSTEM.”**

can demonstrate how we can slow down resource depletion and CO<sup>2</sup> emissions, by recycling most of the waste we generate, and still consume the massive amounts of sh\*\* we feel compelled to buy in this country.

**CEM:** Speaking of recycling right, have you ever been confused standing at a public recycling bin when you’re trying to figure out where to put your recycling?

**BM:** Yes, of course. I’m even confused in my own kitchen because it’s difficult to know what types of plastics can be recycled. How ironic that we’re telling kids in school that recycling is one of the most important things they can do for the environment, and then we make it confusing so they can’t do it right. Because when we’re confused, mistakes are made and tons of trash is thrown in recycling bins every day making the materials useless. It makes no sense, if it’s the most important thing we can do, then it should be easy to recycle right, right?

**CEM:** Are you surprised to learn that despite all of the hype about ‘green’, the U.S. recycling levels are less than 35% and have barely improved in over 15 years?

**BM:** That’s pathetically low — I think this is where we need policy in DC. I’m proud that California, my home state, is one of the most progressive states in the country. Example, just last week Governor Jerry Brown passed a ban on plastic bags, and San Francisco just passed an ordinance banning the sale of plastic water bottles on city-owned property. We’ve always led in areas of environmentalism, including having more restrictive laws on emissions for cars, which forced the auto manufacturers to improve their emissions. So I think it’s just a matter of time before the rest of the country follows California’s lead, and at least bans the use of plastic bags. But we also need national government to push for stronger incentives for recycling or penalties for landfilling, and to make recycling mandatory. It shouldn’t be elective.

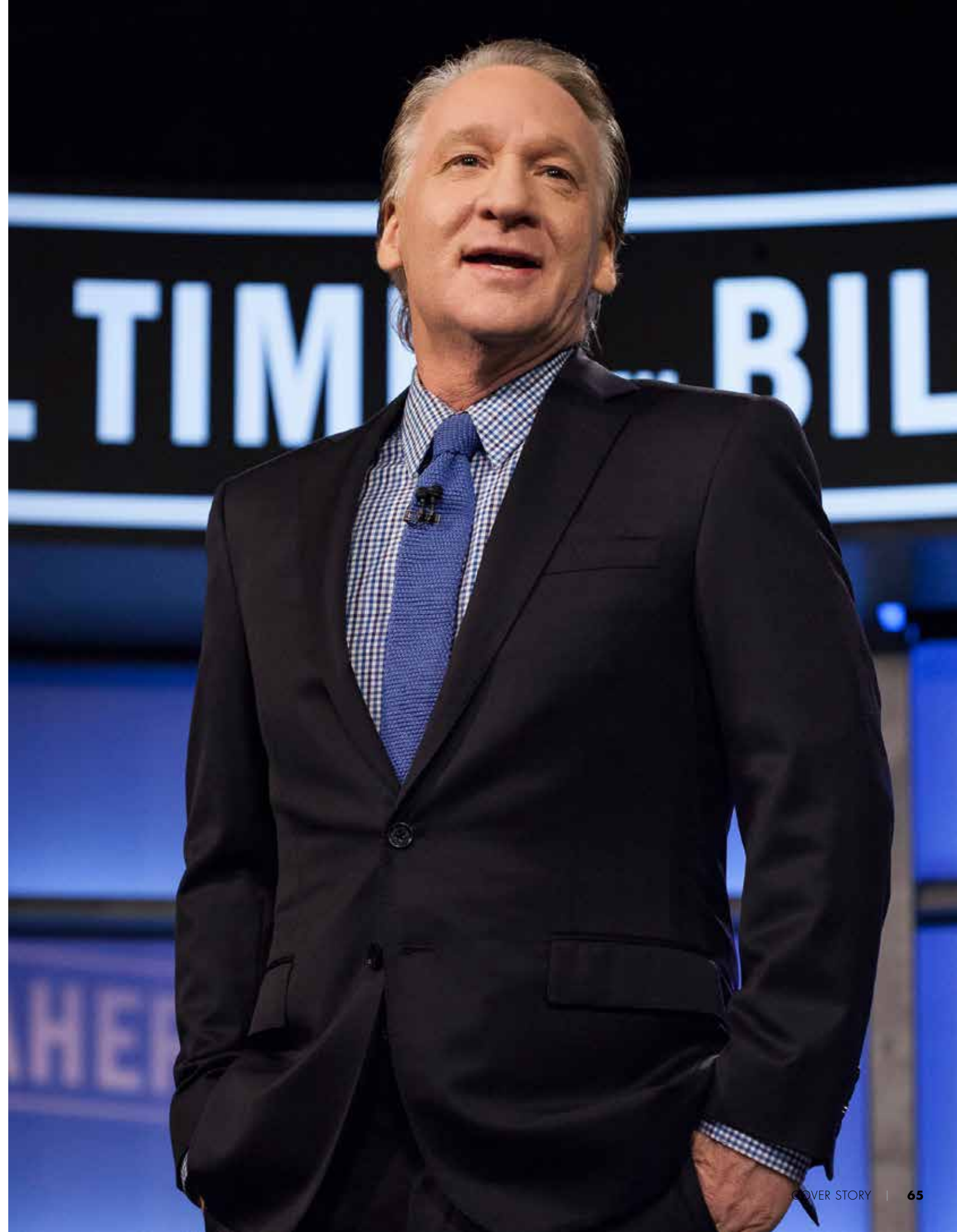
**CEM:** Why do you think the environmental movement and climate change became a political issue?

**BM:** Unfortunately *everything* these days has become a political and controversial issue. We never used to behave like this. Somehow the political culture has become so combative in the U.S. that it doesn’t matter how good the program is for all of us, the Republicans won’t agree. There was a time when the First Lady would choose a non-controversial cause and the country would get behind it — it was kind of sacred territory. Now things have changed so much that Michelle Obama is promoting eating healthy food, which you would think is a non-controversial issue, and somehow that’s become controversial — the Republicans hear her plan and say, “Nope, I’m going to sit in the garage with the motor running and eat bacon grease out of a coffee can” (laughing).

I don’t think all Republican’s think that global warming is a hoax, I just think that they want to put a thumb in the eye of the Al Gores of the world, and they will go up against anything environmental to do it. They’ll cut off their nose despite their face but unfortunately we all share that face, so we’re all affected by their obstructive actions against pro-environmental policy.

**CEM:** Environmentalism is still seen as anti-capitalism and yet in reality they aren’t exclusive of each other. In other words, there’s still a particular *party mindset* to resist anything that’s pro-environment, even if a strong business case has been proven.

**BM:** Right, environmental actions are proven to make good business sense and a number of big corporations are getting that now. But the dumb\*ss right wing continues to push the “job” button, giving the impression that you can’t have job growth if you’re pro-environment. It’s like saying we shouldn’t capture serial killers because we don’t want morgue workers to lose their jobs. This is a dynamic economy so people will always lose jobs; it’s part of our system. But all of this and the “job” hot button is part of their *murky the waters* strategy. For instance coal mining







Bill Maher & Willie Nelson on the set of Real Time With Bill Maher

**“WE’RE IN TREMENDOUS DENIAL. AND WE’RE IN AN INTERESTING SITUATION, BECAUSE THIS IS THE ONLY DUMB\*SS COUNTRY THAT HAS A CONSERVATIVE PARTY THAT DENIES CLIMATE CHANGE IS REAL.”**

provides 80,000 jobs in the U.S. and the solar industry has already created 142,000 jobs, but they aren’t acknowledging that.

In the short term and long-term interests for the economy and the environment, it would cost less to retrain those workers for cleaner jobs and invest in alternative energy sources. However, there’s a force in our political system that is constantly working on protecting the most costly and harmful industries and jobs, versus investing in a sustainable strategy. What is it about fighting to protect some of the worst jobs ever, like coal mining and the jobs on oilrigs?

We need to get accurate info to Jane Public so the environmental naysayers stop pushing the ‘lose our jobs’ panic button. The reality is that when it comes to trash, if we get our recycling levels up to 75% in the U.S., it will generate 1.5 million new jobs, net. And it will be the CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent of removing 50 million cars off the roads each year in the U.S. Seriously, who can argue with that?

**CEM:** Do you think the public is becoming desensitized to news about the environment and climate change and if so, do you have some ideas to engage society to begin taking a stronger interest and take action?

**BM:** People are desensitized and even though we can layout maps and charts showing dramatic changes in our climate worldwide, the changes just aren’t radical or gruesome enough. If climate change was captured on videotape and put on the news for beheading someone in the elevator, then we’d have a reaction, but the danger isn’t imminent enough each day for the public to put it on their worry list.

Couple that with the Republicans very deliberate strategy to muddy the waters on messaging about climate change, and now you have public inaction and lack of priority to change policy. We saw this with the tobacco companies when the medical results started coming out about the relationship between

**“I TELL THE YOUNGER PEOPLE THIS; I’M ALMOST 60. I’VE HAD A GREAT TIME ON THIS EARTH, BUT YOU’RE JUST GETTING STARTED SO YOU NEED TO CARE ABOUT IT MORE THAN I DO. YOU NEED TO VOTE FOR ISSUES THAT PROTECT IT, YOU NEED TO TAKE PERSONAL ACTION, AND YOU NEED TO TAKE IT SERIOUSLY BECAUSE IT’S A DIFFERENT PLANET THAN WHAT WE’VE KNOWN.”**

smoking and cancer. You payoff a couple of scientists to come out with reports saying the relationship between smoking and cancer is unclear, and now you’ve taken the public’s eye off the matter and they keep lighting up. Chaos and confusion is an effective strategy, and unfortunately the strategy is being used on the environmental movement.

Most of society only reacts to things that scare us, like Ebola and ISIS. Personally, I have zero fear that ISIS is going to attack me in the street and cut off my head, or that I’m going to get Ebola living here in L.A. Something in the environment is going to be catastrophic someday and it will cause people to react, but until then the problem is that climate change is too glacial; it’s so slow moving that it hasn’t created a panic yet.

We do see weather changes that are frightening — droughts, floods, extreme temperature changes, Frankenstorms, wildfires that are far worse than historically seen. And it’s far more than Pat Robinson can blame on gays. But many people still see this as a temporary condition, and that things will resume to normal soon. In China it’s become regular behavior to wear masks to go outside because the air quality is so dangerous. So the signs are all around us but we’re still not acting.

Even if you’re not paying attention to the obvious signs in climate change, we need to ask ourselves where’s the logic in using up all of our resources at a reckless pace when we can be reusing those materials instead?

**CEM:** Are we as a society in denial?

**BM:** Yes, definitely on this issue. We’re in tremendous denial. And we’re in an interesting situation, because this is the only dumb\*ss country that has a conservative party that denies climate change is real. This has changed from the 90s; Bush Sr. was the President to put the Cap and Trade policy in place. All the big boy countries have conservative parties, none of whom deny climate change, but here in the U.S. the conservatives in the last 20 years have taken a position to deny climate change, versus promoting market driven strategies to solve it, which is what the more normal conservative approach might have been in the past.

**CEM:** What’s next for you?

**BM:** (laughs) Well, first of all I’d like to keep breathing. I’d like to live in a world where I don’t need a HAZMAT suit when I go outside. That sounds extreme right? But take a look at China. This is real. I tell the younger people this; I’m almost 60. I’ve had a great time on this earth, but you’re just getting started so you need to care about it more than I do. You need to vote for issues that protect it, you need to take personal action, and you need to take it seriously because it’s a different planet than what we’ve known.

I just read this in the paper today, in 20-40 years we’re going to lose half of the species on this planet. Even if you don’t like animals, they’re still part of the ecological system — it’s the thread in the sweater reaction. Do you really want to live a world where there’s no fish — where you’re eating frick’n jellyfish and cockroaches for dinner? Do you want to live on this planet where it’s 140 degrees in Phoenix? You are the ones that have to care. That’s my message to them, but many of them are more interested in seeing J-Lo’s t\*ts on the Internet. Listen, just put the t\*ts down for a two seconds, and take a look at the environment. The environment will need more attention from the next generation, then from any other generation before them.

As the interview comes to a close, I am grateful that Bill is sharing his voice, face and persona to the subject of trash, the environment, and to the “Let’s recycle right!” campaign and solution. We’re here to say, “There’s a problem, let’s face it. Here’s a solution, so let’s do it,” and I can’t think of a better person to take on that message than Bill Maher.

billmaher.com  
recycleacrossamerica.org/leaders-for-progress