

Climate Change, and Ideas for Action

In this article I have attempted to summarize some of the best thinking about climate change done by environmental scientists and social change activists. I have also included my own ideas, and proposals for action.

We human beings developed from small bands of primates surviving by gathering plants and hunting a few animals to larger bands using tools and fire, to developing languages, to domesticating animals and growing crops, to creating written languages, to inventing the wheel, to smelting metals, to inventing complex machinery, to understanding the causes of many diseases, to inventing the computer and other electronic technology. We overcame near extinction about seventy thousand years ago, when our total population was about two thousand individuals, to become the dominant species on the earth today. We are creative, caring, cuddly, and fun!

We have made good use of many accidental discoveries, including in recent times the discovery that if we listen to each other carefully and provide each other with contradictions to our distresses, our inherent intelligence and cooperativeness shine through.

Unfortunately, our success in “taming” nature has led to serious environmental problems that threaten our future. We have the capacity to solve these problems, but it is challenging to look at them without becoming so restimulated that we cannot think well about the solutions. Our restimulation can make it easy for us to fall into one of two traps: either turning away from the problems because it is too uncomfortable to look at them, or crying out for and pursuing action based on feelings of desperation. With discharge, we can move forward logically and powerfully without falling into either of these traps. We can play a significant role in building a powerful social movement to halt environmental degradation and to make the planet a much better place for all of us.



JAYE ALPER

FACTS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Here are some facts about climate change agreed upon by ecologists and climate scientists:

- Carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere are increasing as a result of humans burning fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas/methane) and clearing vast areas of forested land that previously stored huge amounts of carbon.
- Carbon dioxide traps heat that would otherwise escape into space, just as the glass in a greenhouse roof traps heat within a greenhouse. Increases of carbon dioxide and other “greenhouse gases” in the atmosphere have already caused the average temperature of the earth to rise by 0.8 degrees Celsius (1.4 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial average temperatures. Increases in carbon dioxide also cause the oceans to become both warmer and more acidic. This is particularly destructive to coral reefs, which are the nurseries for large numbers of fish and other marine life.
- During the last ten thousand years, after we humans had learned how to grow crops instead of mainly hunting and gathering our food, the climate was fairly stable, never rising or falling more than a half of a degree Celsius on average. In general, it was not difficult to figure out when and where to grow successful crops.
- An increase of two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels would create serious problems, sometimes called climate chaos:
 - * Reduced crop yields in the major grain-producing nations
 - * An eventual rise in sea levels of approximately twenty-five meters (eighty-one feet), due to the melting of ice in Greenland and Antarctica
 - * The extinction of thousands of species of plants and animals
 - * The melting of mountain glaciers that supply water to billions of people in Asia and South America

- If the current rates of carbon dioxide production continue, the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would, within a few decades, lead nearly inevitably to a temperature increase of at least two degrees Celsius.
- About a billion people live within twenty-five meters of sea level. A temperature increase of two degrees Celsius would force these people to move inland and force the world's population to be fed from a smaller amount of arable land.
- The extinction of plants and animals caused by a temperature increase of two degrees Celsius would threaten the stability of the earth's ecosystems. Topsoil would be lost, deserts would spread, and the oceans would become more acidified.

THE UNDERMINING OF LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

The roughly ten thousand generations of *Homo sapiens* have survived under many conditions—have survived the ice ages, have survived in deserts. But even if we survived continuing climate change, life as we know it now would be seriously undermined:

- The decreased amount of arable land would make it significantly harder to produce enough food for the eight billion human beings that could be living on earth in the next ten years.
- Soil infertility, pollution of water and air, and acidification of the ocean would lead to even more intense competition for food, fresh water, and other resources.
- There would be even more widespread poverty, starvation, war, lawlessness, and increases in communicable diseases, leading to unstable governments.
- Access to weapons of mass destruction would make it easy for desperate, irrational individuals, organizations, and nations to wage extremely destructive wars.

We are approaching an unprecedented crisis in the coming decades unless we replace our exploitative, already-collapsing capitalist system with a fair and sensible system. And we need to do this in the next decade!



KATIE KAUFFMAN

WHY THE CLIMATE CRISIS DOESN'T LOOK LIKE A CRISIS

Most U.S. people do not yet see climate change as a crisis. In the 2012 U.S. presidential election, climate change was barely mentioned. Many other people around the world also do not connect their immediate problems—for example, increasing floods and droughts and lack of food—to climate change. Reasons for this include the following:

- *Lack of information about the causes and serious effects of climate change:* Conservative sections of the owning class, and the mainstream media, have systematically distorted the facts.
- *How humans notice changes:* Human beings are quick to notice sudden changes but tune out more gradual change. For example, if we gradually increase the temperature of the water in a bathtub, we can tolerate temperatures that would seem much too hot if we suddenly immersed ourselves in water at those temperatures. Similarly, small changes in the earth's temperature over many years do not register with many of us, even though the effects of these gradual changes could affect the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

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WIDE WORLD CHANGING

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- *Our distresses interfering:* Our distresses can make us feel powerless and unable to face the crisis.

STEPS TO AVOID CLIMATE DISASTER

Technology can help us solve our environmental problems, but the main question is whether we humans can cooperate effectively enough to solve them—and do this before the problems get out of control. We will need to unite and insist on new policies as a society (not just improve individual behavior). Policies we'll need to insist on include the following:

- Massively developing solar power, wind power, and other renewable sources of power, and conserving energy. In World War II the U.S. automobile industry rapidly converted from consumer products to military products. We have the ability to make such a change—this time converting from military production to renewable energy production.
- Sharply reducing the burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas/methane)
- Restoring ecosystems—protecting and increasing forests, conserving and rebuilding soils, conserving water, regenerating fisheries, protecting plant and animal diversity
- Eating lower on the food chain—a great deal of energy is wasted by feeding grain to cattle and hogs
- Eliminating poverty, stabilizing the human population, and providing each person with a basic education, basic health care, access to family planning, and a productive job (if the person is able)



MARGO HITTLEMAN

The only humane way to limit population is to eliminate poverty. People of all cultures tend to have fewer children when they aren't struggling economically, particularly when women and girls have access to basic education, health care, and family planning.

The rich nations of the world have been the main contributors to greenhouse gases and other environmental degradation. They have also created the poverty in the poor nations, by exploiting those nations' labor and natural resources. Rich nations need to reverse course and use their (ill-gotten) wealth to eliminate poverty and spread renewable energy. Therefore, the movement to halt climate change must be integrally linked to the movements to stop the rich nations from exploiting the poor nations and to require them to compensate for their past exploitation.

Continuing climate change would be devastating for all of us, but it would hurt people targeted by racism first and worst. It is hurting them now. When flooding, droughts, and forest fires occur, people targeted by racism generally lack the resources with which to escape, survive, and recover. African Americans living in Los Angeles (California, USA) are more than twice as likely to die in a heat wave than other residents of the city. People in coastal regions are overwhelmingly people targeted by racism. Many of them depend on subsistence farming or fishing, and their way of life is already being dramatically damaged by climate change. Therefore, the movement to halt climate change must be integrally linked to the movements to eliminate racism. (Many organizations are now working to bridge the gap between what have often been seen as separate issues—poverty and racism on the one hand, and environmental destruction on the other.)

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE, POVERTY, RACISM, AND WAR

Continued population growth would increasingly degrade the environment and lead to socio-economic conditions conducive to terrorism and economic wars.

The rich nations of the world, particularly the United States, have enough money to fund the policy steps listed above. Ecologist Lester Brown estimates that an earth restoration budget, based on those policy steps, would cost about a third of what the United States spends on its military, or about a sixth of the world's military expenditures. Using this money to protect

the environment is a far better defense of people and the planet than using it for military purposes. But the U.S. “military-industrial complex” is completely intertwined with the largest corporate interests, and both will unceasingly fight these measures. The capitalist system will continue to resist changes that are in the real human interests of everyone. This is because under capitalism decisions are based on profits rather than human needs.

A SHIFT IN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC POWER

We will have to overcome the resistance of corporate interests in order to halt climate change. This will involve a profound political and economic power shift in the United States and other industrialized nations—a shift that will require the active support of the majority of the population. A broad coalition will be necessary, including the environmental movement; the movements to end racism, poverty, and war; and a movement to replace capitalism with an economic system that puts people and the planet above corporate profits.

In our favor is that the need for such a mass movement has never been greater. And the movements against war, poverty, classism, sexism, racism, and environmental destruction are now converging more powerfully than ever before. We also have better models: the past century has produced a large number of successful nonviolent direct-action movements that have been free of many of the problems in the revolutionary movements that have used violence as a main tactic.

TAKING ACTION

We can’t wait until we have discharged enough to feel comfortable with taking action. Harvey Jackins urged us to decide, act, and then discharge any distresses that interfere with deciding and acting. As he said in *The List* (on page 27), “Choosing and deciding against the pattern, and the permanent removal of the pattern through exhaustive discharge . . . support each other . . . neither process must be postponed for or ‘wait for’ the other.”

Harvey realized that “powerlessness . . . has to be *the* distress that we have gone on¹ respecting and treating as if it were reality. . . . What is holding us up from² decisive action, from speaking out clearly

enough about the things that we know well so that large numbers of people will hear us and will act in a rational, human direction? . . . The name of this unchallenged distress is powerlessness.” (See “Powerlessness Is a Fraud,” on pages 87 to 98 of *The Upward Trend*.)

We in RC have valuable information to share with social change activists. We need to engage with the people who have already decided to take action and share our tools with them, while learning what they have figured out. With the perspective of our new

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DIANE SHISK

¹ “Gone on” means continued.

² “Holding us up from” means preventing us from taking.



LAURIE RHODES

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goal,³ we can build relationships with environmental and social and economic justice activists.

See Madeleine Para's "Call to Action," on page 75 of the July 2012 *Present Time*, and the article by Morag Carmichael, "Prioritising Action," on page 80 of the January 2013 *Present Time*. See also the March 8, 2013, article by Wytse Visser and Diane Shisk, "Our Work on Racism Is Key to our Work on the Environment," on the e-mail discussion list for RC Community mem-

³ A goal adopted by the 2013 World Conference of the Re-evaluation Counseling Communities:

That members of the RC Community work to become fully aware of the rapid and unceasing destruction of the living environment of the Earth. That we discharge on any distress that inhibits our becoming fully aware of this situation and taking all necessary actions to restore and preserve our environment.

Distresses have driven people to use oppression against each other and carry out destructive policies against all of the world. A full solution will require the ending of divisions between people and therefore the ending of all oppressions.

The restoration and preservation of the environment must take precedence over any group of humans having material advantage over others. We can and must recover from any distress that drives us to destroy the environment in our attempts to escape from never-ending feelings of needing more resource.

bers. It is a crucial reminder that people targeted by racism have often been left out of the discussion on care of the environment—a critical mistake that we have begun to address.

We don't need to take giant steps at first, and care of the environment doesn't have to become *the* primary focus for each of us. However, we can all support the people who are already challenging oppression and working to limit climate change.

Seán Ruth's⁴ perspective (on page 53 of the July 2014 *Present Time*) is also important: "Some of us have assumed that as capitalism collapses, RCers will step forward and provide clear perspectives and leadership. This is not yet happening. . . . I believe that we can decide to do it and become a huge resource. However, it will take decision to make this happen."

We can all decide and act. We can oppose the mistaken policies and support the new good ones. A direction to try in Co-Counseling sessions might be, "If I do my part to change the policies that lead to climate disruption, civilization will not collapse. Doing my part means"

We will make mistakes, but with discharge we can understand and correct them. Waiting for sufficient discharge before we take action is probably a bigger mistake than any other.

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Some of the sources of information used in this article:

Lester Brown, *Plan B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble*, 2006

Lester Brown, "Could Food Shortages Bring Down Civilization?" *Scientific American*, May 2009

Lester Brown, *World on the Edge*, 2011

Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster, "What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism," *Monthly Review*, March 2010

Bill McKibben, "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math," *Rolling Stone*, July 19, 2012

⁴ Seán Ruth is the International Liberation Reference Person for Middle-Class People.