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We are all climate refugees now

How politics is failing the people on fighting climate change

Read this article in German.

Modern humans, born into one climate era, called the Holocene, have crossed the border into another, the Anthropocene. But instead of a Moses guiding humanity in this new and dangerous wilderness, a gang of science deniers and polluters currently misguides humanity to ever-greater danger. We are all climate refugees now and must chart a path to safety.

The Holocene was the geological age that started more than 10,000 years ago, with favourable climate conditions that supported human civilisation as we know it. The Anthropocene is a new geological era with environmental conditions that humanity has never before experienced. Ominously, the Earth's temperature is now higher than during the Holocene, owing to the carbon dioxide that humanity has emitted into the atmosphere by burning coal, oil, and gas, and by indiscriminately turning the world's forests and grasslands into farms and pastures.

People are suffering and dying in the new environment, with much worse to come. Hurricane Maria is estimated to have taken more than 4,000 lives in Puerto Rico last September. High-intensity hurricanes are becoming more frequent, and major storms are causing more flooding, because of the increased heat transfer from the warming waters of the oceans, the greater moisture in warmer air, and the rise in sea levels – all made more extreme by human-induced climate change.

Just last month, more than 90 people perished in the suburbs of Athens from a devastating forest fire stoked by drought and high temperatures. Huge forest fires are similarly raging this summer in other hot and newly dry locales, including California, Sweden, Britain, and Australia. Last year, Portugal was devastated. Many record-high temperatures are being reached around the world this summer.

The US vs the climate

How utterly reckless of humanity to have rushed past the Holocene boundary, ignoring – like a character in a horror movie – all of the obvious warning signs. In 1972, the world's governments assembled in Stockholm to address the growing environmental threats. In the lead-up to the conference, the Club of Rome published *The Limits to Growth*, which first introduced the idea of a 'sustainable' growth trajectory and the risks of environmental overshooting. Twenty years later, the warning signs flashed brightly in Rio de Janeiro, where United Nations member states assembled at the Earth Summit to adopt the concept of 'sustainable development' and to sign three major environmental treaties to halt human-induced global warming, protect biological diversity, and stop land degradation and desertification.

So why does humanity keep plunging dumbly ahead, toward certain tragedy?

After 1992, the United States, the world's most powerful country, ostentatiously ignored the three new treaties, signalling to other countries that they could slacken their efforts as well. The US Senate ratified the climate and desertification treaties but did nothing to implement them. And it refused even to ratify the treaty to protect biological diversity, in part because western-state Republicans insisted that landowners have the right to do what they want with their property without international meddling.

More recently, the world adopted the Sustainable Development Goals in September 2015 and the Paris climate agreement in December 2015. Yet, once again, the US government has wilfully ignored the SDGs, ranking last among the G20 countries in terms of government implementation efforts. And President Donald Trump has declared his intention to pull the US out of the Paris climate agreement at the earliest possible moment, 2020, four years after the accord entered into force.

Our political institutions are failing

Worse is to come. The human-caused rise in CO2 hasn't yet reached its full warming effect, owing to the considerable lag in its impact on ocean temperatures. There is still another 0.5° Celsius or so of warming to occur over the coming decades based on the current concentration of CO2 (408 parts per million) in the atmosphere, and far more warming beyond that if CO2 concentrations continue to soar with the business-as-usual burning of fossil fuels. To achieve the Paris agreement's goal of

limiting warming to 'well below 2°C' relative to the pre-industrial level, the world needs to shift decisively from coal, oil, and gas to renewable energy by around 2050, and from deforestation to reforestation and restoration of degraded lands.

So why does humanity keep plunging dumbly ahead, toward certain tragedy?

The main reason is that our political institutions and giant corporations wilfully ignore the rising dangers and damage. Politics is about obtaining and holding power and the perks of office, not about solving problems, even life-and-death environmental problems. Managing a major company is about maximising shareholder value, not about telling the truth or avoiding great harm to the planet. Profit-seeking investors own the major media, or at least influence it through their advertising purchases. Thus, a small yet very powerful group maintains the fossil-fuel-based energy system at growing peril to the rest of humanity today and in the future.

A large majority of the American people, for example, want to fight global warming, stay in the Paris climate agreement, and embrace renewable energy.

Trump is the latest useful fool doing the polluters' bidding, abetted by congressional Republicans who finance their election campaigns with contributions from environmental culprits such as Koch Industries. Trump has filled the US government with industry lobbyists who are systematically dismantling every environmental regulation they can reach. Most recently, Trump has nominated a former lawyer for mega-polluter Dow Chemical to lead the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund toxic clean-up program. You can't make this stuff up.

We need a new kind of politics that starts with a clear global goal: environmental safety for the planet's people, by fulfilling the Paris climate agreement, protecting biodiversity, and cutting pollution, which kills millions each year. The new politics will listen to scientific and technological experts, not self-interested business leaders and narcissistic politicians. Climatologists enable us to gauge the rising dangers. Engineers inform us how to make the rapid transition, by 2050, to zero-carbon energy. Ecologists and agronomists show us how to grow more and better crops on less land while ending deforestation and restoring previously degraded land.

Such a politics is possible. In fact, the public yearns for it. A large majority of the American people, for example, want to fight global warming, stay

in the Paris climate agreement, and embrace renewable energy. Yet, as long as a narrow and ignorant elite condemn Americans and the rest of humanity to wander aimlessly in the political desert, the more likely it is that we will all end up in a wasteland from which there will be no escape.

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