

The End Is Near? Sustainable Life on Planet Earth

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Theme: [Environment](#), [History](#)

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Apocalypse has been given a bad name. The Seventh Day Adventists are still around. The Nike sneaker cult failed to open Heaven's Gate. The new millennium brought us George W. Bush, not Jesus H. Christ. And everybody's terrified of "drinking the Kool-Aid."

But our species is living beyond its means. If we continue down this path, the planet, our food supplies, our climate, and life as we know it will collapse. If we bring population growth, consumption, and pollution under control, the damage already set in motion will play out for centuries, but complete catastrophe will likely be averted.

Nobody likes to be told that the end *might* be near. Either it is or it isn't. And the question is resolved by a personal lifestyle choice. Do I wish to be a pessimist or an optimist? Of course, optimist is far more popular. Even most predictors of apocalypse have actually believed they were predicting a good thing. The world was to be replaced with something better. Even our best environmentalists who understand the radical changes needed for survival guarantee they will happen. Harvey Wasserman [says he simply believes](#) in happy endings.

Meanwhile, we can [barely get half of us](#) in the United States to "believe" that global warming is happening. Of course, we step outside and there's a sauna, but that could just be "natural." So what if [the ocean](#) is a few inches higher? The people who've been predicting that for decades have been wrong until now, and now they're only a little right — if you even believe them. The ocean looks about the same to me. And if they predict exponential acceleration of such changes, meaning that once the changes have become visible it won't be long before they're enormous, well that just proves one thing: they've drunk the Kool-Aid. They're pessimists.

In 1992, governments finally got together in Rio and took some baby steps. In 2012, they reconvened and [collectively proclaimed](#), "To hell with all that. This rock may be doomed, but that's our great-grandchildren's problem. This is Rio. Roll down the windows. Turn up the air conditioning. Pass me a drink!" Well, actually, a few scientists and diplomats stood off to the side and [muttered](#), "What we need to save us is a really bad catastrophe." And a 17-year-old girl stood up and [blurted out the truth](#), which made everybody feel really important. Imagine: you were at the meeting that could have chosen to save the planet; how cool is that? Imagine how the judge feels who is sitting in Washington, D.C., [deliberating](#) on whether the atmosphere ought to be protected or destroyed. The atmosphere! Of the earth! Now that's power, and the longer you deliberate the longer you can fantasize about possibly even using that power.

In 1972 a group of scientists published a book called *Limits to Growth*. It passionately urged

the changes needed before human growth and destruction exceeded the carrying capacity of the planet. In 1992, the same authors published *Beyond the Limits*. There were by then, they found, too many humans doing too much damage. We were beyond sustainable limits and would need to change quickly. In 2004, they published an update, arguing that we were already 20 percent above global carrying capacity, and that we had “largely squandered the past 30 years.” Their warnings grew sharper: “We do not have another 30 years to dither.”

The [updated book](#) charts the course we’ve been on these past 30, now 40, years. Population has exploded in less industrialized countries. Many millions of poor people have been added to our species, while a shrinking percentage of the world’s population has continued to hoard most of the wealth. The planet has become less equitable through the repeated act of giving birth. Then it has become less equitable still through economic growth that has been made to benefit most those least in need. Meanwhile, nations with high population growth have been least able to invest in infrastructure, being obliged to take care of their people’s immediate needs. This has resulted in still greater poverty, triggering higher birth rates in families dependent on children to survive. These vicious cycles can be broken, and have been broken, but not by wishing or hoping. And time is running out.

Sustainable agriculture is being practiced in some places and could feed us all if practiced everywhere and the food distributed to everyone. The problem is not figuring out what to do so much as simply doing it. But we can’t do it individually, and we can’t wait for those in power to do it on their own.

Corporations will not learn to make more money by behaving responsibly, not to a sufficient extent to reverse current trends. The logic of the market will not correct itself, except in the most brutal sense. If we wait for Wall Street to decide that destroying the Earth is a bad idea, the basic systems of life on Earth will collapse in shortages, crises, and widespread suffering. Instead, we have to enforce change as a society, and we have to do it now. If we’d acted in 1982, write the authors of *Limits to Growth*, we might have avoided serious damage. If we’d acted in 2002, we also still had a fighting chance. By 2022, it will be too late to avoid decline. We’re halfway there.

Limits to Growth offers the crisis of the ozone layer as evidence that humanity can face up to a global environmental disaster and correct it. Of course, we can. We have always had that option and always will. Even beyond 2022, we will have the option of lessening the destruction to as great an extent possible. But slowing the damage to the ozone layer required changes to a relatively small industrial cartel, nothing to compare to big oil. The question is not, I think, whether the world can act collectively on behalf of the Earth. The question is whether the world can act collectively against the organized strength of the fossil fuels industry, its closely aligned military forces in the United States and NATO, and governments far gone down the path of inverted totalitarianism.

For you optimists, I should point out that living sustainably need not mean suffering. We could live better lives with less consumption and destruction. Our culture can grow while our population declines. Our society can advance while our production of waste products retreats. Our mental horizons can broaden while our food sources narrow. Millennia from now, people living sustainably on this planet could look back with wonder at the insanity of the notion that everything had to *grow*, and with gratitude toward those who gave their fellow passengers an awakening smack to the face.

Here's [one small place to start](#).

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