LIFE IN THE GREEN GAP

The other kind of climate change denial.

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In the space of a few short days this past spring, President Donald J. Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate change; Rick Perry, Trump's Secretary of Energy, said that the human contribution to rising global temperatures "is not settled science"; and Scott Pruitt, the head of Trump's Environmental Protection Agency, restated his belief that the causes of global warming are subject to "debate." Trump, Perry, and Pruitt can be globally considered the Big Three of climate change denial, since they're now in unique positions not just to make infuriating public statements but also to determine the policies of the world's most ravenous consumer of natural resources.

But there is another kind of climate change denial out there—a kind that may pose an even greater threat to the future of civilization. Most of the putatively climate-friendly behaviour changes that I and other reasonably concerned people have adopted during the past couple of decades—recycling our trash, upgrading to more energy-efficient appliances, buying produce at farmers' markets, bringing our own shopping bags to the grocery store—have been minimally beneficial, sometimes even counterproductive. The main effect has been not to halt the world's accelerating slide towards catastrophe, but merely to relieve the consciences of the guiltiest parties, often while making the underlying problems worse. The disconnect between good intentions and useful action has been referred to as the Green Gap. It's the place where most of us live.

In the minds of people who worry about the future, the big existential question is usually whether we have the will, as a species, to rapidly make a sufficient global investment in wind turbines, solar panels, and charging stations for electric cars. But the real question is whether we have the will to leave some very large fraction of the world's remaining fossil fuels in the ground, untouched, forever. And it's one that most of us effectively answer no to every day, even if we also write angry Facebook posts about the self-serving ideologues now running things in the United States. Air travel is at record highs, the best-selling passenger vehicles in North America continue to be light trucks, and much of what passes for thoughtful activism is really just shopping at different stores.

No matter your environmental bent, it's never easy to dial back modern life. Even median-income North Americans today live more opulently than the world's richest people throughout most of human history. (King Croesus didn't have flush toilets, antibiotics, or frequent-flyer miles, among other deprivations.) Luxuries become necessities with frightening speed. What happened to the millions of cathode ray tube television sets that we happily used before high-definition flat screens came along? Not even cheap motel rooms have them now. Did all those old sets simply go to the dump, along with the smartphones we abandon long before we've worn them out?

One challenge is that the climate impact of carbon dioxide emissions is cumulative, while the climate impact of individual carbon reductions is not. If I turn on a 75-watt incandescent desk lamp, I make what for all practical purposes is a permanent addition to the world's carbon load, because the electricity that powers the lamp comes from a generating plant that burns natural gas, and once the carbon dioxide produced by combustion has spewed from the plant's exhaust stacks it won't leave the atmosphere on its own. If I replace my 75-watt incandescent bulb with a 9-watt LED, therefore, I feel as though I've done something environmentally valuable, since the LED produces a similar level of illumination from a fraction of the current.

But, as with all improvements in efficiency, the environmental impact depends on what I do with what I save. If, as is almost always the case, I use my energy windfall to help pay for some other energy-consuming activity—driving my car, ordering stuff from Amazon Prime, travelling to Europe with my wife, becoming lazier about turning off lights—I won't have shrunk my carbon footprint at all; I'll just have slightly altered its shape. Still more problematic is the fact that making machines more energy-efficient isn't a tool for lowering consumption; it's the lever we've always used, since the beginning of civilization, to lift consumption higher. Air conditioners today individually use much less electricity than the air conditioners that were available when I was a child, in the 1950s. But, because air conditioners are now so inexpensive to manufacture and operate, they've long since ceased to be a rarity, and people in the United States now consume more electricity operating them than they did for all purposes when my parents splurged on their first one.

Photo: Luke Flynt

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The real cause of rising global temperatures isn't micro-scale purchasing decisions made by affluent people; it's affluence itself. My electric bill is almost certainly a less telling measure of my environmental impact than my tax return is. That's why the most immediately effective force for reducing global carbon output, so far, has been recessions: when economies go into reverse, emission-spewing factories close, worried workers stop heating their swimming pools, and the unemployed cut back on everything. But, when economies recover, the old trends return. The graph to watch is not the one that tracks orders for Tesla Model 3; it's the one that tracks the level of atmospheric carbon dioxide—and that graph continues to rise. In order to bend the line downward, we need to find a way, globally, to mimic the environmentally beneficial effects of economic collapse without inflicting even more misery on the already miserable. Changing light bulbs won't do it—and the Paris Agreement, no matter who signs it, won't either.

A few years ago, I gave a talk in which I argued that traffic congestion has environmental value, because it discourages people from using their cars, which are the world's leading vectors of environmental ruin. Cars consume energy directly, of course, but in many ways they do their biggest damage indirectly, by encouraging sprawl and the construction of redundant civic infrastructure, and by making it easy for people to live far from their jobs, in oversized houses with oversized yards and oversized stuff. A greener strategy, I said, would be to make car use more annoying, not less—and one way to do that would be to intentionally exacerbate traffic congestion while reducing the total travel load, by shrinking existing roadways.

A member of the audience spoke to me afterward, and said he strongly disagreed. He lived in San Francisco, he explained, and one of his favourite weekend pastimes was hiking in mountains north of the city—but traffic between the city and the mountains had gotten so bad that his drive to his favourite hiking places now sometimes took hours. His inconvenience was an environmental problem, he said, because it forced him to spend less time communing with nature than he would otherwise be able to—in his view, a bad thing not just for him but for the world.

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This narrowly personalized view is one that major environmental groups have subtly encouraged, perhaps partly because it aligns well with the lifestyle preferences of their principal supporters. The argument is that we can't truly value nature unless we are able to experience it, recreationally, for ourselves. There's truth in that, but it's also true that human intimacy with wild places is and always has been the principal cause of their destruction—one of many examples of our habit of, literally, loving things to death. A personal relationship with nature does not scale up to a human population of 9 or 10 billion. Living "off the grid" in a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Platinum house with an organic garden beside a mountain stream isn't an act of environmental responsibility. It's a luxury choice.

This is perhaps most apparent in the increasingly watered down usage of the word "sustainability." For most of the people (and advertisers) who use it, it means something like "pretty much the way I live right now, but maybe with a different car." A good reality check is to ask how truly different most of our lives would be if there were no such thing as anthropogenic climate change. Would cars and pickup trucks and houses be even bigger? Would gasoline be even cheaper? Would airports be even more crowded? We'd have fewer wind farms and solar panels, for sure, but how many are there now?

A real step towards a more promising future would be to abandon our habit of treating ever-increasing consumption—also known as economic growth—as the principal measure of human fulfillment. That's hard even for people who already possess more comforts than they know what to do with, and it's impossible for those who now have essentially none. (Hundreds of millions of people around the world lead lives that would be improved immeasurably by nothing more than the electricity I waste when I forget to turn off the bathroom lights.) We've never been very good at "less"; we need to get much better at it, and to do it not just here and there in our private lives but globally, equitably, and soon.

This September, the conservative commentator Ann Coulter wrote, on Twitter, "I don't believe Hurricane Harvey is God's punishment for Houston electing a lesbian mayor. But that is more credible than 'climate change.'" Coulter's tweet is egregious, of course. But she, and cynical deniers like her, are not our civilization's only problem. ■

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