

Climate can't wait for techno-fixes

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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"This is a guest essay from Jan Lundberg, who is, at press time, on the Climate Emergency Fast promoted by Mike Tidwell's organization. It is a response to Tidwell's recent piece in Grist, "Consider Using the N-Word Less." Jan publishes Culturechange.org and participates in campaigns to have cities ban plastic bags and water bottles. His previous article in Gristmill is '(How can we be) looking at the end of the age of oil.'"

We have to do more to minimize global heating and catastrophic climate change than do the same things differently. Rather, it is time for a revolution in our culture's values and pursuits. Climate scientists bear this out with their findings and warnings, which is why we hear Al Gore now calling for a 90 percent cut in greenhouse gas emissions. (At this point he's allowing too many years to reach the objective, but he's on the right track.)

Energy efficiency is vital when we are such a wasteful society, because modest changes can reap huge savings. There can be further technological improvements to cut greenhouse gases while allowing people to continue their lives in the same fashion, for a time, that they have enjoyed (or endured). However, as Mike Tidwell pointed out in "Consider Using the N-Word Less," relying on measures such as simply encouraging better light bulbs and more fuel efficient cars will fail. Knowing that the Earth's climate is shaping up to rapidly shift to a new state -- probably not seen since 55 million years ago -- we cannot play politics with what really needs to be done to make a last attempt to curb greenhouse gas emissions sufficiently. Yet under our system of big business and its influence over both legislation and the content of media, we are witnessing a tragic denial of the need to do the possible, now, to slash greenhouse gas emissions. The present economy is held to be more important.

We cannot buy our way out of the climate crisis, although we must make wiser purchases. It is imperative to simply stop polluting the thin envelope of Earth's atmosphere with carbon dioxide. It can't be stopped 100% overnight, which is what our cherished climate needs, but we can and must carry out essential travel and exchange of goods and services without the excesses of global corporate trade and consumerism. Being car-free, for example, is much better and transformative than buying a gas-sipper. Not having electric appliances, or sharing them with neighbors (as in a laundromat, or an internet café or library), is worthy of the climate challenge we face. We need to accept the sight of clothes-lines, depave driveways and parking lots to plant gardens, and refuse to buy products transported long distances.

A technological fix does not recognize the urgency of the crisis or the challenges of too many billions of consumers at a time of peaking global oil extraction. We need something strong that's commensurate with the threat, instead of barely ratcheting up some comfortable remedies. What about lifestyle change and embracing local economics to replace globalized corporate pillaging?

Society is overdue in debating the feasibility of technofix development and slow implementation versus slashing energy use and corporate profit now. Is it feasible to have a kick-in-the-balls approach to the global heating beast, or not? For a stronger, quicker approach than Mike Tidwell's, let's consider:

- He wrote, "Like Jim Crow practices, we must by law phase out completely the manufacture of inefficient light bulbs and gas-guzzling cars, as a serious start to fighting this problem." This would have been a real start two decades ago when the situation was more manageable and resources were not so depleted, in a less populated world. His message, resting on his examples, does not deliver, just as an anti-racism campaign does not get at root causes if fundamental economic injustice is not addressed with actions that support an alternative.

The gap between what the technofix-approach offers and the problem at hand is not just something for us to read about over coffee as we check our Daily Grist. What Tidwell considers a cure will hardly suffice at this point, when global heating has started to spin out of control.

- "To move our nation off of fossil fuels, we need inspired Churchillian leadership and sweeping statutes a la the Big War or the civil-rights movement." Too bad Tidwell's measures do not heed the climate scientists' warnings. The right to private property has rationalized unending greed. It controls our politics, so any honest leadership would have to come from someone -- you and me -- other than the leaders we have elected and can see on the mainstream horizon.

- Why do measures that are not even half-measures get the lion's share of attention? Lifestyle change is not where the funding wants to go. So, much nonprofit activism props up the status quo. Not buying any new cars, whether one goes car-free or not, is a serious measure for dismantling the power structure of climate destruction, if done on a large enough scale.

- Tidwell's conclusion -- "...muscular clean-energy statutes that would finally do what we say we want: rescue our life-giving Earth from climate catastrophe" -- is a top-down solution that takes precious time and would not slash greenhouse gases to the extent needed. This approach would fall far short of the need for the 90% greenhouse-gases immediate reduction. Some environmentalists suffer from the illusion that major changes are just not in the offing, or are too sensitive to bring up. Or, we must offer a solution that is relatively painless and allows people to think that their basic way of life as consumers will merely change a bit, for the better, but not be upended.

It turns out that with peak oil here already, we are soon not going to have the cheap energy to maintain global trade or food production on today's scale. And renewable energy is not ready to step in as enough of a substitute, when the oil market will soon be handing us an unmanageable, exacerbated shortage. Our approach at Culture Change includes the Sail Transport Network and gearing up for Puget Sound operation in conjunction with SCALLOPS (the Sustainable Ballard initiative). There can be joy in losing the consumer economy, if we can live with a whole "new" scale befitting a small, threatened planet.

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From the comments posted on Gristmill regarding my essay, I shared the following with one person steeped in the debate on good technological tidings versus no technofix. The following also addresses the quandary of how much "bad news" to tell the public:

The public ought to know what it's up against. "The truth shall set you free." Additionally, I like to think that there's something positive in the message of culture change, along the lines of liberation for those who sense they're on the treadmill to oblivion. I've found that my columns do them some good, although admittedly they're seen by a small segment of the population. My message is well received when it gets a chance, much more so than five years ago maybe. People are getting enough misleading nonsense from the government and corporations, such that with climate chaos and nuclear threat, and the likelihood of petrocollapse, people are being led like lambs to the slaughter.

What is the option people have, staying in consumerland? Doubtful in the long term. I just don't buy into the idea of selling the feel-good concept of unlimited energy that would be a free-lunch compared to fossil fuels and nukes. It has to be a question of how many people would be drawing how much resources for how long, and how the renewables stack up against the cheapness and versatility of cheap oil gone.

That's my concern over the recent "can't versus shouldn't" on renewables. The Hirsch Report for the DOE on peak oil made clear the lead time needed to change the petroleum infrastructure. I agree that there's been little attempted and much squandering of time and money for better systems. Yet, I like to question the so-called need for the energy people are used to.

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Further Reading:

"Consider Using the N-Word Less - Voluntary actions didn't get us civil rights, and they won't fix the climate"

grist.org

"(How can we be) looking at the end of the age of oil and abundant energy"

culturechange.org

"Climate can't wait for techno-fixes" [original posting]

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