

# Column:Tipping Point on Climate Emergency

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The comment “Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about” was considered a joke until a few decades ago. As weather extremes get more frequent and more destructive, the real danger of not doing anything about the weather is becoming more evident every year. Sea levels are rising, and waterfront properties are being flooded or washed away. Rivers are drying up and lakes are disappearing. Glaciers are melting, and fields are turning into wastelands. Entire cities are becoming uninhabitable.

We have known for decades what would cause global warming and what would be the consequences. We even knew what would be the solution. Increasing levels of carbon dioxide and methane, so-called greenhouse gases from burning coal and petroleum products, as well as from burning forests, were known to produce global warming and its disastrous consequences more than a half century ago. When greenhouse gases reach a critical level, a tipping point, (a surprisingly small percent of the total atmospheric gasses) runaway heating of the planet occurs, and everything on the planet goes from ‘bake’ to ‘broil.’ Our leaders watched and profited as greenhouse gases accumulated from burning fossil fuels and the destruction of both tropical and temperate forests and hoped that climate change would not accelerate out of control on their watch. But they

were not simply inactive: they were and continue to be complicit.

As of 2022, we are probably at or may have even passed the tipping point. In the face of this climate emergency, the leaders of the nations contributing most to global greenhouse gasses have decided to burn more coal, burn more oil, burn more trees and do whatever else can be done to hasten another mass extinction (there have already been at least five over the past 500 million years) on our fragile planet.

No, this is not hyperbole. As gasoline prices rose to levels that would prevent any American president from getting re-elected, our octogenarian leader swallowed his comments about making the royal thug in charge of Saudi Arabia a “pariah” and went to the land where some women are allowed to drive cars and begged His Murderous Majesty to pump more oil, so that Americans would not need to spend so much on gasoline and he could be the President until he was 85 years old. European leaders were outraged by Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine and decided to stop buying the Russian oil and gas that was financing the war until they discovered that Europe’s economies would crash to a halt without the Russian fuels. Germany, a nation especially dependent on gas piped in from Russia, has tried to reduce its dependence on Russia by switching some gas-powered plants to coal-burning facilities, a change that increases the release of greenhouse gasses. Simultaneously, the world’s forests are being destroyed at a pace suggestive of an invasion by giant, intergalactic termites.

Efforts to offset the accumulation of greenhouses gasses have ranged from the inconsequential to the ludicrous. These include inefficient solar panels, high maintenance wind turbines, and kelp (a kind of seaweed) farms. More efficient and feasible energy sources not dependent on fossil fuels have been hamstrung for decades by the ever-powerful coal and oil industries. Our alternative energy programs and greenhouse gas capture programs are lagging far behind our expanding energy needs and greenhouse gas production.

One of the many ironies of our current climate dilemma is that efforts to deal with it are

making the crisis worse. In much of Europe, air conditioning has long been viewed as something of a luxury, but with triple digit temperatures disabling many workplaces and making homes unlivable the demand for air conditioning is growing rapidly. These devices require lots of electricity, which means more power plants to generate the electricity, which means more greenhouse gas production until plants that do not use fossil fuels can be built. The construction of those plants will require lots of cement and concrete. Cement manufacturing is responsible for 8% of global carbon dioxide emissions, and the demand for cement and concrete products is growing even faster than the population. Each step to make the climate change more tolerable adds to the climate change problem.

Underlying much of our dilemma is our population size. We are about 8 billion people competing for resources. Our species is as belligerent as it is inventive, and so we routinely resort to war to settle grievances, feed inflated egos, or simply eliminate the competition. In America, we looked at our population growth and blinked. We simultaneously vowed to control the influx of poor people by building walls and other highly permeable obstacles while demanding that every fertilized egg be allowed to develop into whatever chance has dictated for it, even if the vessel carrying that egg is a 10 year-old rape victim. Ever increasingly, our decisions are making our predicament more dire. We are trying to save ourselves from drowning by swimming out to sea and praying that a rescue ship will magically appear before a shark notices us.

The mayor of Phoenix, Arizona, boasted of her plan to change the pavement in her city from black to gray. This will reduce the ambient temperature by a few degrees and theoretically improve the quality of life of its residents for a few years. Of course, there will be a need for more water restrictions and increasing electricity costs. Gasoline prices can be pushed down by a few pennies if we make concessions to Middle East tyrants, but they will inevitably consume more of each citizen's income regardless of who the next President is. The mayor of Phoenix should probably post warning signs at the city limits. Welcome signs are certainly not appropriate.

Perhaps we have already passed the climate tipping point, and our fate is sealed. The real tragedy if this is the case is that those of us responsible for this tragedy will not bear the consequences: it is our children and grandchildren who will suffer because of our negligence. We have allowed leaders from all over the world to strip our home, our planet, of its tangible and intangible wealth. We have taken an archaic wish to “be fruitful and multiply” as a mandate, rather than an option. We have fouled our nest, perhaps irreparably. At least we shall not need to wait long for the consequences of our actions. I already feel a change in the wind.

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