

Planet Earth is about to fall off a cliff - urgent action required!

If there's no action before 2012, that's too late. What we do in the next two or three years will determine our future. This is the defining moment.

These remarks were made by **Dr Rajendra Pachauri, the Head of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change**, during his acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the IPCC in 2007. 2,500 scientists from over 80 countries agreed with this stark assessment of our planet's future when they assembled in Copenhagen in March this year.

The best science in the world has recently confirmed what the rest of us have intuitively known for some time – our planet is accelerating towards a cataclysm the magnitude of which is almost impossible to imagine. And yet there's a monstrous mismatch between the sense of urgency the scientists are bringing to the table and the speed with which governments and businesses are prepared to take up the challenge.

What's to be done?

Reality check

First, let's quickly review some of the crucial findings presented in Copenhagen:

- Global temperatures rose by 0.37 degrees Celsius in 2008 – this is 20 times more than normal
- Melt from Greenland and the Antarctic is now enough to cover the State of Texas in 6 metres of water every 24 hours
- 350 ppm of CO₂ is considered by most scientists to be the threshold beyond which the dangers of global warming increase. We're now at 383 ppm and expected to pass 400 ppm within a few short years
- The Arctic Ocean and melting tundras of Siberia are releasing millions of tonnes of methane into the atmosphere every day – methane emits TWENTY times more global green house gases than the burning of fossil fuels

Or, put more simply, extreme weather events can be used as a yardstick to measure the effects of global warming on planet Earth – in 2008 there was an average of one extreme weather event, somewhere in the world, every day. **The number of extreme weather events has quadrupled since 1987.**

Is government action enough?

So what are our governments doing? Most are beginning to take the situation seriously and are making commitments to reduce carbon emissions by 80% by 2050. The European governments are promising to reduce their CO₂ emissions to between 20%-40% of 1990 levels by 2020. These commitments are important, but a recent study by MIT states that if all the governments completely fulfil their current promises, which essentially are pointed toward reducing carbon emissions by 80% by 2050, we will have reached over 600 ppm of CO₂ by then and global temperatures will have risen at least 4 degrees Celsius.

The implications of this are frightening. According to the **2006 Stern report**, prepared by the former Head of the IPCC Nicholas Stern, a rise of 4 degrees Celsius would put upwards of 300 million more people at risk of coastal flooding each year, there would be a 30-50% reduction in water availability in southern Africa and the Mediterranean and increased droughts around the world, agricultural yields would decline by 15%-35% in Africa alone and the world would face severe food shortages, and 20%-50% of animal and plant species would face extinction. **A 4C rise would also lead to the loss of 85% of the Amazon rainforest.**

A 5C rise would mean that all our coastal cities would be threatened by rising sea levels and increases in ocean acidity would severely disrupt marine ecosystems and fisheries. An increase of more than 5C – equivalent to the amount of warming that occurred between the last ice age and today – is, according to the Stern report, "likely to lead to major disruption and large-scale movement of population." The report concludes that the effects would be "catastrophic" and "far outside human experience."

Mobilisation, mobilisation, mobilisation

So what the planet needs is mobilisation on an unprecedented scale. Being green needs to be at the forefront of humanity's collective mind – and that means in the forefront of every individual's mind.

This last remark is an easy one to make. It's one thing for those of us who live in relatively coddled and affluent societies to have the leisure to tear our hair out and think about changing our individual and collective lifestyles – and indeed a tremendous amount is being done by a large number of people to “do their bit”. It's quite another thing for that part of humanity which labours under extreme economic hardship to spare the required time and energy from the basic need to earn a subsistence living. Be that as it may, if the planet is to be saved then every part of the global community, and its every system, needs to get engaged. As Jim Garrison, Founder and President of the State of the World Forum, the non-profit institution dedicated to developing a more sustainable global civilisation, writes on the World Forum website:

First, we must understand that we are confronted by a planet-wide problem and we are all in the same boat together. There is no us versus them on this one.

Second, we will need to involve an amazing variety of populations across the world and the full spectrum of every kind of organization in every sector of the economy, governance and civil society in order to succeed.

Third, we cannot treat anyone or any group in isolation, trying to solve one problem at a time, because we are all linked together as the planet starts to become one world for the first time in history. Planetary integration is our next industrial revolution. This presents us with both a grand opportunity and a tough challenge. All of us -- as individuals, communities, organizations, and governments are, or are becoming, part of one planetary network of systems.

Fourth, practical success at getting things done will be helped by making strategic and integrated use of all of our technology, all of our leadership, all of our plans, and all of our individual and collective values and actions. Greening our economies therefore requires a complete shift in thinking, values, actions and intentions.

The State of the World Forum is launching a global 2020 Climate Leadership Campaign and a Brazil 2020 Campaign with other campaigns forming in Australia, Holland and Mexico. It is doing so because the urgency of global warming mandates that each and every one of us become climate leaders. For the first time in our lives, indeed for the first time in history, all of us must take responsibility for our climate, whether at the individual, community, company, institution, state, or national level. We are all responsible for global warming. We must all share in the leadership required to solve it, for nothing less than the fate of human civilization is at stake. The crisis is that stark, the choice is that clear, the leadership required is that urgent.

The Forum believes that if we rise to this challenge, if we take climate leadership, we will generate climate prosperity and climate justice because it is precisely our capacity to solve our greatest crisis that affords us our greatest opportunities for growth within the context of sustainability and alignment with natural systems.

A paradigm shift is what planet Earth needs - the role of business and governments

Everyone has to be involved – but big business and governments have to be absolute and committed leaders in a global movement to save the planet. As Dr Kim Møller of the Oxford Group tells us elsewhere in this newsletter, consumer- and investor-led adherence to values of Corporate Social Responsibility are on the rise in the global business playground – and this is undeniably a very good thing. But is it time for a paradigm shift in strategic corporate and governmental thinking? What if the corporate and government sectors redefined their criteria for success in the most fundamental way imaginable? What if the “growth at any cost” mantra were to be squarely examined, analysed, and shelved? The **18th October 2008 issue of New Scientist magazine** posed the question frankly:

Consumption of resources is rising rapidly, biodiversity is plummeting and just about every measure shows

humans affecting earth on a vast scale. Most of us accept the need for a more sustainable way to live, by reducing carbon emissions, developing renewable technology and increasing energy efficiency.

But are these efforts to save the planet doomed? A growing band of experts are ... arguing that personal carbon virtue and collective environmentalism are futile as long as our economic system is built on the assumption of growth. The science tells us that if we are serious about saving earth, we must reshape our economy.

This, of course, is economic heresy. Growth to most economists is as essential as the air we breathe; it is, they claim, the only force capable of lifting the poor out of poverty, feeding the world's growing population, meeting the costs of rising public spending and stimulating technological development – not to mention funding increasingly expensive lifestyles. They see no limits to that growth, ever.

In recent weeks it has become clear just how terrified governments are of anything that threatens growth, as they pour billions of public money into a failing financial system. Amid the confusion, any challenge to the growth dogma needs to be looked at very carefully. This one is built on a long-standing question: how do we square earth's finite resources with the fact that as the economy grows, the amount of natural resources needed to sustain that activity must grow too? It has taken all of human history for the economy to reach its current size. On current form it will take just two decades to double.

Scary. The time to think the unthinkable is here.