

Ending the Climate Crisis in One Generation

By Paul Hawken



The climate crisis is not the warming of the planet. What unnerves scientists is what warming will do to life on the planet.

Changes in atmospheric temperature, ocean currents, and melting polar ice could trigger runaway disruption on multiple fronts in rapidly succeeding tipping points. Losses could include more frequent droughts in the tropics that would convert the world's rainforests into fire-prone savannas. Changes in ocean circulation would dramatically alter worldwide weather and agriculture. The rapid increase in fires and pests could lead to the collapse of our northern forests. Ocean heating and acidification could cause the death of every coral reef in the world. The accelerating melting of the Thwaites Glacier in Antarctica would cause a three-foot rise in sea levels. The melting of Arctic permafrost would release massive amounts of ancient stored carbon dioxide and methane.

It is difficult, if not incomprehensible, to imagine how these events would affect families, cities, economies, companies, food, politics, and children in more temperate climates. However, it is not difficult for more than two dozen Arctic cultures who are experiencing the impact of the melting Arctic directly and quickly: the Inuit, Yupik, Chukchi, Aleuts, Saami, Nenets, Athabaskan, Gwich'in, and Kalaallit, cultures that have occupied their lands for up to ten thousand years.

Accurate as they may be, climate predictions can obscure another set of tipping

points, the numerous small changes and crucially important outcomes that lead to people's involvement and participation, rather than passivity and fear. These are actions that slow, forestall, and transform the climate crisis.

Ending the climate crisis means creating a society that is going in the right direction at the right speed by 2030, a rate of change that will lead to zero net emissions before 2050. That means halving emissions by 2030 and then halving again by 2040.

Tens of thousands of organizations, teachers, companies, architects, farmers, Indigenous cultures, and native leaders know what to do and are active in implementation. The current growth of the climate movement is magnificent, but it remains a small fraction of the world.

Hundreds of millions of people need to realize that they have agency, that they can take action, and that collectively it is possible to prevent runaway global warming.

The agent who can head off the climate crisis is reading this sentence. Logically, this seems like nonsense—surely individuals are powerless to counter the global drivers and momentum of global warming.

That's a fair conclusion if we assume that yesterday's institutions should or will do it for us. There is a debate as to whether individual behavior or government policy is the key to solving the climate crisis. There shouldn't be. We need the involvement of every sector of society, top to bottom, and everything between.

It is engaging and fascinating to calculate one's own carbon footprint, but *Regeneration* – my [upcoming book](#) and [course with Commune](#) – takes a different and wider tack, because there is no such thing as a single individual.

Thinking you are an individual is self-identity. Being an individual is an ongoing, functional, and intimate connection to the human and living world.

When we look at our networks, each of us is multitudes. We have different skills and potential, including sharing, electing, demonstrating, teaching, conserving, and diverse means of helping leaders, cities, companies, neighbors, co-workers and governments become aware and able to act.

Worried that you are not an expert? Almost no one is. But we understand enough. We know how greenhouse gases function and warm the planet; we are seeing greater climate volatility and extreme weather; and we know the primary sources of carbon emissions. We want a stable climate, food security, pure water, clean air, and an enduring future that we can become ancestors to. Cultures, families, communities, lands, professions, and skills vary with every person. The situations we find ourselves in differ.

Who better to know what to do at this time, in this place, with your knowledge, than

you?

Nevertheless, solving the climate crisis is an unnatural act, one that human beings are ill-equipped to do. Our minds just don't work that way.

The idea of a future existential threat is abstract and conceptual. War metaphors about fighting, battling, and combating climate change don't connect either. Who wakes up in the morning excited about mitigating or getting to "net zero" in thirty years?

Most people ignore climate headlines, and for good reason. The overwhelming majority focus on current dilemmas, not distant ones, obstacles that impact one's life now, not in 2050. On the other hand, humans are notably brilliant at joining together to solve problems. Give us immediate threats like an impending cyclone, flood, or hurricane, and we are all over it.

If we are going to engage the bulk of humanity to end the climate crisis, the way to do it is counterintuitive: to reverse global warming, we need to address current human needs, not an imagined dystopian future.

If we want to get the attention of humanity, humanity needs to feel it is getting attention.

If we are going to save the world from the threat of global warming, we need to create a world worth saving.

If we are not serving our children, the poor, and the excluded, we are not addressing the climate crisis. If fundamental human rights and material needs are not met, efforts to stem the crisis will fail. If there are not timely and cumulative benefits for an individual or family, they will focus elsewhere.

The needs of people and living systems are often presented as conflicting priorities—biodiversity versus poverty, or forests versus hunger—when in fact the destinies of human society and the natural world are inseparably intertwined, if not identical.

Social justice is not a sideshow to the emergency. Injustice is the cause.

Giving every young child an education; providing renewable energy to all; erasing food waste and hunger; ensuring gender equity, economic justice, and shared opportunity; recognizing our responsibility and making amends to myriad communities of the world for past injustices—these and more are at the very heart of what can turn the tide for all of humanity, rich and poor, and everyone between. Reversing the climate crisis is an outcome. Regenerating human health, security and well-being, the living world, and justice is the purpose.

This requires a worldwide, collective, committed effort. Collectives do not emerge

from the tops of institutions. They begin with one person and then another, the invisible social space where commitment and action join and come together to become a dyad, a group, a team, a movement.

To put it simply: no one is coming to help. There is not a brain trust that is going to work out the problems while we ponder and wait.

The most complex, radical climate technologies on earth are the human heart, head, and mind, not a solar panel.

Just as we stand at the abyss of a climatic emergency, we stand at another remarkable threshold. The rate of understanding and awakening about climate change is increasing exponentially, even skyrocketing. Climate change is becoming experiential rather than conceptual. As weather becomes ever more disruptive, and awareness and concern increase, the movement to reverse the climate crisis will likely become the largest movement in the history of humankind. It took decades to create this moment.

It is natural to worry that it matters little if you are taking action if others are not. From the planet's point of view, there is no difference between a climate denier and someone who understands the problem but does nothing.

The number one cause of human change is when people around us change. Research by Stanford neuroscientist Andrew Huberman upends the idea that beliefs determine what we do or what we can do. It is the opposite. Beliefs do not change our actions. Actions change our beliefs.

Do you believe there is nothing you can do to make a difference? Logical.

Do you fear the future? Understandable.

Do you feel stressed about climate change? Sensible.

However, stress is your brain telling you to act. Stress is a signal; it is urging you to do something. **Not only do actions change your beliefs, your actions change other people's beliefs.**

When honeybee scouts find a bounty of blooms and nectar, they return to the hive, where they do a symbolic waggle dance at the entrance of the hive. The dance signals the precise direction and distance to the flowering plants or trees. The more vigorous the waggle, the richer the source of nectar. Once worker bees have seen the dance, they have the necessary information and fly straight to the source.

It is time for humanity to create waggle dances unique to their knowledge, place, and determination.

Another way to look at this time in history is this: we are being homeschooled by the planet, our teacher.

Regeneration – my [new book](#) and [Commune course](#) – is an attempt to reflect those teachings.

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