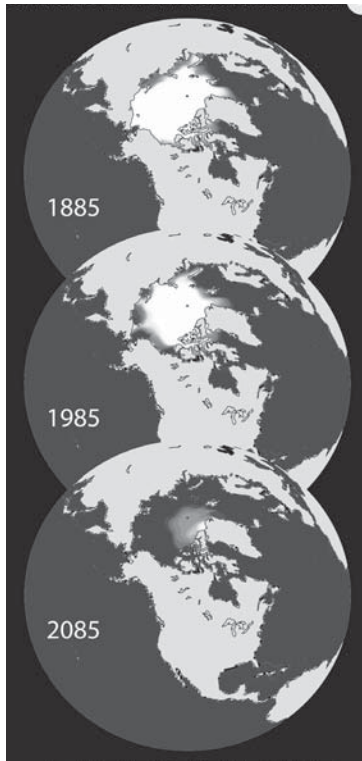


The Greatest Challenge Humans Have Ever Faced

Bill McKibben

At any given moment, we face as a society an enormous number of problems: there's the mortgage crisis, the health care crisis, the endless war in Iraq, and on and on. Maybe we'll solve some of them, and doubtless new ones will spring up to take their places. But there's only one thing we're doing that will be easily visible from the moon. That something is global warming. Quite literally, it's the biggest problem humans have ever faced.



These National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) simulations show the actual and projected change in the polar ice caps.

There are ways to deal with this problem, but the first thing we must do is acknowledge how large the challenge really is.

What exactly do I mean by large? Last fall the scientists who study sea ice in the Arctic reported that it was melting even faster than they'd predicted. From outer space, the Earth already looks very different: less white, more blue.

What do I mean by large? On the glaciers of Greenland, 10 percent more ice melted last summer than any year for which



Waves come up over a sea wall.

we have records. James Hansen, America's foremost climatologist, testified in court last year that sea levels might increase as much as six meters — nearly 20 feet — in the course of this century.



A tractor works land affected by drought.

What do I mean by large? Already, higher heat is causing drought in arid areas all over the world. In Australia, things have gotten so bad that agricultural output is falling fast and the prime minister is urging his people to pray for rain. Australian voters ousted their old government last fall, largely because of concerns over climate.

What is Climate Change?

What do I mean by large? If we had tried, we couldn't have figured out a more thorough way to make life miserable for the world's poor, who will absorb much more than their fair share of disease, drought, and flooding brought on by climate change.



Climate change will bring new epidemics of mosquito-borne diseases

What do I mean by large? We've never found such an efficient method for obliterating other species. We've never figured out another way to so fully degrade the future for everyone who comes after us.

Or rather, we have figured out one other change that rises to this scale. That change is called all-out nuclear war, and so far, at least, we've

decided not to have one. But we haven't called off global warming. Just the opposite: In the 20 years that we've known about this problem, we've steadily burned more coal and gas and oil, and hence steadily poured more *carbon dioxide* into the *atmosphere*.

Here's what we need to do:

We need to conserve energy. That's the cheapest way to reduce *carbon*. Screw in energy-saving lightbulbs, blow in insulation, and start using a water-saving front-loading washing machine with the dial turned to cold water. The dryer? You don't need a dryer – that's the sun's job.

We need to generate the power we use cleanly. Wind is the fastest growing source of electricity generation around the world – but it needs to grow much faster. Solar panels are increasingly common, but they are not common enough. Governments need to come up with creative new arrangements to finance and subsidize the development of *renewable energy*.

The pictures below (here and on the next page) are symbolic of Bill McKibben's suggestions for what we can do to address climate change. In the space provided, write a caption that describes the suggestion.



We need to change our habits. Do we want enormous homes and enormous cars all to ourselves? Do we want to keep eating food that travels 1500 miles to reach our lips? Can we take a bus or ride a bike to the farmers' market? Farmers' markets are the fastest growing part of the American food economy. Who uses them? It may be mostly urban immigrants. They have arrived from other parts of the world recently enough that they can remember what actual food tastes like.

We need to face facts. The way we are living on the Earth is wrecking the Earth.

Most of all, we need a movement. We need a political swell larger than the civil rights movement — as passionate and as willing to sacrifice. Without it, we're not going to best the *fossil fuel* companies and the automakers and the rest of the vested interests that are keeping us from change.

We need a different way of being in the human community. Our economic life cannot be based on endless expansion. The kind of extreme independence that derived from cheap fossil fuel — the

fact that we need our neighbors for nothing at all — can't last. Either we build real community, of the kind that lets us embrace mass transit and local food and co-housing and you name it, or we will go down clinging to the wreckage of our privatized society.

Which leaves us with the one piece of undeniably good news: we were built for community. Everything we know about human beings, from the state of our immune systems to the state of our psyches, testifies to our desire for real connection of just the kind that an advanced consumer society makes so difficult. We need that kind of community to slow down the environmental changes coming at us, and we need that kind of community to survive the changes we can't prevent. And we need that kind of community because it's what makes us fully human.

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