

Earth's Bucket List
Things to Do Before It's Too Late
By
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Not too long ago our greatest struggle regarding Global Warming was just getting people to talk about it, or to even admit that it's happening. I remember, for instance, when *Time Magazine* published its first cover story on the issue, "Special Report on Global Warming." "Be Worried." The headline said, "Be Very Worried." Believe it or not, that was only ten years ago, in 2006. And it was the first time I'd seen a national news organization give Global Warming any serious coverage. It was major because admitting it's happening, that it's real and we better do something fast, represented a paradigm shift that was threatening to the status quo because it urged us to start behaving differently.

About a year later, *Newsweek* published an article about a heavily financed denial campaign that had successfully convinced many Americans that Global Warming is nothing but a hoax. Yet Senator Barbara Boxer, Chair of the Senate's Environmental Committee, was quoted as saying the science on the matter is "unequivocal... the denier's days were numbered." It also talked about an ExxonMobil funded think tank that paid scientist \$10,000 for articles debunking Global Warming.

"Since the 1980s," it said, "this well-coordinated, well-funded campaign by contrarian scientists, free-market think tanks and industry has created a paralyzing fog of doubt around climate change."¹ But when debunking it no longer worked, they shifted their tactics to suggest scientists couldn't agree about it's cause, then that it's a naturally occurring event that isn't caused by humans and will have only a minimal impact on us, and, later still, for a short unsuccessful period, they even tried suggesting that warming temperatures are actually going to be beneficial to us. Today, having exhausted all other arguments, they've fallen back to their old standby, that doing anything to protect the environment will cost millions of jobs—an unfounded assertion that really is a hoax.

I remember all of this, and when the conversation, if we can call it that, finally began to change. I'd been doing what I could to speak out publicly about Global Warming and to engage in environmental causes, including organizing an annual Sustainability Fair. Once I even saved my junk mail for an entire year, then returned it to the Post Office on Earth Day. It got a little press and, to my surprise, made a lot of people unhappy with me, but the editors of *Yes!* Magazine listed me as one of the people they love.

¹ <http://www.newsweek.com/global-warming-deniers-well-funded-99775>

Around this time, after I no longer felt I had to concentrate all my efforts on simply making people aware of Global Warming, I began, for the first time, considering what I could do to help stop Global Warming. On one unusually hot, humid, miserable summer day, when I realized each new year was progressively becoming the hottest on record, I felt overwhelmed, wondering if it's too late to do anything. For so long the biggest problem was just getting people to talk about it, and now that they were, the much more daunting problem was doing something about it. I hadn't had to think about it before and, now that I was, there didn't seem to be much anyone could do.

"After 250,000 years of human history," I lamented, "why did I have to be born at the end of the world? We've come so much farther so much faster than any other creature ever to have lived, and now, before we finally learn to transcend all the pain and injustice we cause each other, we're going to go extinct, leaving our planet and its future to the cockroaches. I wonder if they will evolve as quickly, learn to go to the moon, or develop an Internet, and, more importantly, develop the capacity for compassion and justice. Will they evolve more quickly even than our mammalian species were able, or will the insects, like those cold-blooded reptilian dinosaurs, merely roam the Earth for hundreds of millions of years as little more than giant, vicious eating machines? Will there ever emerge another creature like us with so much potential, with the ability to make music and write poetry and gaze into the heavens and wonder about where they've come from? Will there ever be another species as conscious as we are, with the promise of becoming increasingly aware until the Universe itself becomes self-aware and we are all one? Is it already too late? Have we dealt evolution a tragic blow because of our greed and shortsightedness? Why, oh why, of all times, did I have to be born at the end of the world?"

I've since had a lot of time to come to terms with the reality we're facing and to make a short bucket list of all the things our species has wanted to do for thousands of years but just never got around to it. But now that our time is running out, all those little things we've been concentrating on seem so unimportant—like making our nation the greatest and most powerful in the world, or becoming more prosperous than everyone else, or keeping down anyone who might threaten our own group's special interest, or taking control of the loud speaker and silencing anyone who disagrees with us, or hunting down and killing our enemies, and all the other routine habits it's now so apparent we've been wasting our whole lives on.

So what's the first thing we should do now, while we still can? Let's begin by creating world peace. We've wanted to do it for so long. We've been singing and praying for "Peace on Earth" for centuries, but have let too many unimportant concerns get in the way. So let's just do it. We can start by simply making war illegal. Instead of maintaining a list of war crimes, let's make war itself a crime. Instead of establishing the rules of engagement, let's rule out all such engagement. Just as it is illegal for rival members in a neighborhood to kill each other and destroy each other's property, let's make it against the law for any country on Earth to kill its

neighbors and destroy their communities. Let's have one day, and then another, and then another, and another, and another when we can say there was peace on Earth because yesterday no government on the planet was responsible for dropping a bomb or firing a gun anywhere.

We can start by promoting an international *World Without War* campaign, making it a political issue, and begin surfacing and supporting political leaders who endorse it. And let's bolster the authority of the United Nations so it can truly represent the interests of all countries, not just the richest and most powerful. Instead of UN peacekeepers, let's create UN peacemakers, large enough and strong enough to stop violent conflicts wherever they emerge and to enforce mandatory negotiations to end such conflict for good. It may not be a perfect solution, but it's got to be better than what we've been doing. And if peace really does begin with us, then, on a local level, we must demand that our local leaders adopt ordinances that begin demilitarizing our local police departments, and change the name of our police officers to peace offices, while training them to understand they are not working in a war zone, and how to deescalate violence, not resort to it.

Next on the bucket list, to go along with peace on Earth, how about a little goodwill toward all? Instead of business as usual and seeing our planet as a discordant collection of different countries with different cultures and different races, erecting artificial borders and walls between us, let's acknowledge that there is only one world and we are all part of one human race. Instead of demonizing those who seem different, let's celebrate diversity and start learning from our differences. Today we live in a global community, with one environment, one atmosphere, one communications network, one economy, one set of international laws, and a growing number of international institutions, and it's about time we start acting like we're one people too. As historian Yuval Noah Harari says, "As the twenty-first century unfolds, nationalism is fast losing ground² ...States are obliged to conform to global standards of financial behaviour, environmental policy and justice. Immensely powerful currents of capital, labour and information turn and shape the world, with a growing disregard for the borders and opinions of states."³ Moral philosopher, Peter Singer says, "Until recently such thoughts have been the dreams of idealists, devoid of practical impact on the hard realities of a world of nation-states. But now we are beginning to live in a global community."⁴

So the only thing left to do now, the thing we've been wanting to do forever but have kept putting off because we imagined there was still plenty of time, is to create one set of human rights that apply to people everywhere, no matter what country they live in, what their religion is, or their gender, or sexuality, or the color of their skin. Toward this end, we should establish a set of human rights to be respected by all

² Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2015, (Kindle version), loc. 3185.

³ Ibid. loc. 3201.

⁴ Singer, Peter, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, 2nd ed., Yale University Press, U.S. 2004, p. 196.

nations stating that all people are born free and equal, without distinction of any kind, including race, color, sex, sexuality, language, religion, politics, beliefs, nationality, property, birth, or other status; that they have a right to live free and safe, and never be subject to slavery, servitude, torture, or to cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment or punishment; and that everyone shall have equal protection under global laws, and have fair, impartial trials; and that each person has the right to leave any country and return to any country, including one's own; and everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and to peacefully assemble, and to take part in government, and to access public services, and to express their will in free and honest elections; and they have the right to work and choose what their work will be, and to equal pay without discrimination, and to a living wage that ensures these standards of human dignity, and the right to join unions to protect their interests, including time to rest and recreate; and that all children, regardless of their birth circumstances, shall have the same protections and care; and that everyone has the right to an education, an education that strengthens one's respect for these basic human rights and fundamental freedoms, promoting tolerance and egalitarianism everywhere.

I realize this may sound daunting, yet this list is but a synopsis of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations way back in 1948. So it's already part of global law. Now all we have to do is demand it be enforced, and that those who violate these rights, no matter from what nation, great or small, rich or poor, including those who may hold the highest of offices, shall be held accountable by the global community.

Next on the list, let's end poverty. It would be terrible for the world to end before we accomplish this. The good news is that this isn't a very high bar either. It's kind of embarrassing really, that we've waited until the 11th hour to finally do something about it. There are already plenty of resources, enough food, and clean water, and clothing and shelter, as well medicine, and teachers, and so much more for everyone. Alas, the greed of a few has long outweighed the needs of the many, but here at the end of the world it's time to put the just distribution of wealth into practice. I don't care if this is accomplished through Socialism, or Capitalism, or Communism, or some other *ism*. For it's the greed, not the *ism*, that needs to be addressed. There have been times and places throughout our history in which all these economic systems have both worked and failed. What matters most is whether or not we have rules and regulations in place that ensure a level playing field for everyone no matter what our economic practices are.

As a global community we've made great strides in this area during recent years, even amidst devastating Climate Change, and the unprecedented concentration of wealth into the hands of the top 1 percent of 1 percent. It's estimated that since 1990 poverty rates have been cut in half. So we're already on our way to checking this one off our bucket list. But we can't get lazy now. There are still nearly a billion people living on less and \$1.25 a day, most of them in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa; and, on a worldwide scale, one in four children is below the average height

for her or his age. And given the current refugee crisis, the worst in human history, many of our gains could be lost. It's estimated there will be 60 million refugees forced to leave their homes due to conflict this year. That's 1 out of every 122 people on the planet. So, let's keep this one on the bucket list and end poverty while we still can.

Finally, the last thing on the Earth's short bucket list is to restore a healthy environment. Maybe things will heal themselves after we're gone, but it only seems fair that we should at least try to leave things better than they were when we arrived. I realize this is the very problem that has gotten us into this mess, but cleaning up the environment is another task we can accomplish if we really want to. In fact, in many ways, it's already happening. According to the Union of Concerned scientists we already have everything we need to supply 40 percent of our energy needs from renewable sources over the next 20 years, and 80 percent by 2050. And energy companies in two-thirds of the states in the US have already met the new requirements for obtaining certain percentages of their power from sustainable sources. And, according to the International Energy Agency, "By 2020, the amount of global electricity generation coming from renewable energy will be higher than today's combined electricity demand of China, India and Brazil."⁵ By 2020, that's just four years away!

According to a report from the Renewable Energy Policy Network, in just one decade, between 2004 and 2014 the number of people in the world without access to modern energy services has dropped dramatically from 25 percent to less than 10 percent, thanks to growth in renewable energy technologies. During that same period investments in renewables grew from nearly 40 billion to 214 billion dollars, and the number of nations promoting renewable energy more than tripled.⁶ Ordinary people in communities just like ours are standing up in droves to bring and end the dying coal industry and the deadly oil industry, including having successfully defeated multiple attempts to construct several new fossil fuel export terminals right here in Washington. Despite a recent decline in sales due to lower gas prices, the hybrid car industry continues to increase its market share and to expand the number of options available to consumers. And those worried that protecting the environment costs jobs, should keep in mind that the Bureau of Labor and Statistics recently reported that for the first time ever there are now more solar jobs in the US than oil jobs. Renewable energy equals jobs! And what are those jobs? The bulk of them are installing solar panels onto private homes as the technology continues to become more affordable for all of us.

That covers our energy needs. What about scrubbing the atmosphere and returning carbon levels to normal? That's an easy one; all we have to do it use a simple, affordable, renewable resource that's been around billions of years—trees! Instead of burning down rainforests to produce palm oil, or bulldozing them to make Big

⁵ <http://www.iea.org/topics/renewables/>

⁶ http://www.ren21.net/Portals/0/documents/activities/Topical%20Reports/REN21_10yr.pdf

Macs, let's start a global effort to plant forests that will naturally devour the carbon in the air, produce more oxygen, and restore both to the right balance. While it's true that currently more than 10 percent of our tree species are threatened with extinction, it is also true that there are numerous organizations that exist for no other purpose than planting billions of trees around the world. The world's largest plant conservation network, Botanic Gardens Conservation International, is working specifically to conserve those trees threatened with extinction, while others, like The Nature Conservancy, which is working to plant a billion trees by 2025, and the International Tree Foundation, working directly with those small countries most directly impacted by deforestation, and the United Church of Christ's Plant a Global Tree project, and organizations like Trees for the Future, Global ReLeaf, Global Trees Campaign, and more are working to heal the lungs of the Earth by simply planting more trees.

So that's it, that's my short bucket list of things to do before the world ends. World peace, equality for all, end poverty, and heal the environment. These are simple things we've wanted to do but have been putting off for far too long because we thought we had all the time in the world. But now that the apocalypse is nigh, why not accomplish them while we still can?

Of course, to be completely honest, I don't accept the prognosis. I don't believe we're in an apocalypse. Sure, things are bad. Species are going extinct at unprecedented rates, the oceans are acidifying, droughts abound, the glaciers are melting, and the planet is burning. No doubt about it, the Earth is in critical condition. But we've been here on the brink several times before and have managed to recover. This is, in fact, the 6th mass extinction our planet has experienced. Everyone knows about the one that killed off the dinosaurs, for instance, but the very first mass extinction happened 2.5 billion years ago, back when single cells were still the only living organisms. Like today, however, a population explosion caused so many of them that they were polluting the atmosphere by excreting too much oxygen into it. We need oxygen to breathe, but it is also one of the most corrosive and explosive elements in existence. So species were dying off at alarming rates and the Earth was about to become just another stellar fireball. But then, just when all seemed lost, some of the cells adapted and began devouring the oxygen and excreting carbon instead, which eventually restored the balance and saved the planet. If a bunch of mindless single-cells can do it, why not billions of people with consciousness and consciences?

And, as we've seen, that's precisely what's happening today. Even as many of our governments and politicians are still debating about what to do, billions of people around the world are already adapting to the threat of Global Warming by doing something about it. So this may not be the end, as much as it is a time of transformation, in which life must adapt by altering its behavior. It is the moment, the opportunity, for us to finally come together as one planet and one people to accomplish the things we've been dreaming of for centuries.