





Sustainability failed. The future is just climate.

by Simon Propper | May 20, 2019 | Blog

“My success, part of it certainly, is that I have focused in on a few things.”

Bill Gates

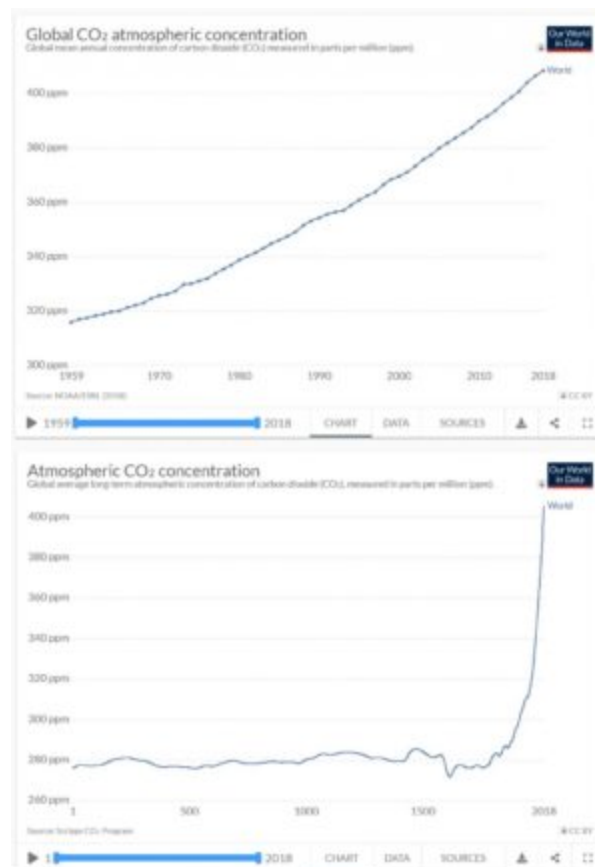
Let's be honest. We are not going to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees C. That target is a bust. We are already two thirds of the way towards 1.5 degrees, having reached one degree of warming this year.

The IPCC has told us that to stop at 1.5 degrees, we need to reduce emissions by 45% from 2010 levels by 2030 and reach “net zero” around 2050. Well, we are no longer at 2010 levels. CO₂ emissions are running at about 2010 levels plus 10%. So that's something like 55% less CO₂ emissions in the next twelve years, we need to achieve. And that's not going to happen.

Hell, it takes that long just to build a railway link across London or LA. Imagine the power generation infrastructure, smart grids, efficient production processes, and transport systems we'll need, worldwide, to cut our global emissions in half. Not to mention reforestation, changes in diet and agriculture and a carbon tax on international aviation. And all of this pales into insignificance compared to the political dialogue needed to coordinate activity between and within countries. Twelve years is just three terms of the American presidency. What chance America ceases to be the great bad actor?

The climate denial lobby in the US has been so effective that I meet people every day who think it's not real, or wildly exaggerated. And I live in California, which relatively speaking is the greenest state. We don't have anything near a popular mandate to act on this issue in the US.

Meanwhile the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere continues to rise remorselessly. The first chart below shows the last 100 years, and the second 1,000 years.



Societies in most countries rumble on, worried about other things. The French are arguing about wealth distribution and church restoration. The Americans about abortion and trade tariffs. The British about Europe. The Chinese worry about – actually, I have no idea. A 2018 OECD survey, “Risks That Matter” identified the issues most concerning the populations of 21 countries. The top issues are health, wealth and accessing social services. – no mention at all of climate change.

So either we aren’t worried about climate change, or we are so worried about it we don’t want to think about it. In fact, there is evidence our populations are divided along climate lines. Many, probably most, continue reaping whatever benefits capitalism and technology provide: fast fashion, disposable packaging, short lived cell phones, cheaper flights. The list is endless. Others (e.g. Extinction Rebellion, are fully aware of the existential threat posed by climate change, and are close to panic. Their protests sound alarmist and shrill. Their remedies draconian and infeasible. Millennials and Gen Z are increasingly fatalistic, feeling there’s nothing they can do to save themselves and their as yet unconceived children. Talk of not having kids, because of climate change, is commonplace.

As if society needed it, yet another issue polarizes and divides us.



If there was ever a time for leadership, this is it. And perhaps she has appeared. Swedish teenage phenomenon, Greta Thunberg, is the Kim Kardashian of climate. Greta likens our situation to a house on fire. Since the IPCC has warned that we have only twelve years to be able to limit global warming to 1.5C, the house on fire analogy is not exaggerated. Her youthful clarity, authenticity and bluntness have given her platforms at the Vatican, the U.N. and the UK Parliament among others. She is

utterly unphased by age or power. She repeats accusations and instructions calmly, without fear:

“Now we probably don’t even have a future any more. Because that future was sold so that a small number of people could make unimaginable amounts of money”

“You lied to us. You gave us false hope. You told us that the future was something to look forward to. And the saddest thing is that most children are not even aware of the fate that awaits us”

“Around the year 2030, 10 years 252 days and 10 hours away from now, we will be in a position where we set off an irreversible chain reaction beyond human control, that will most likely lead to the end of our civilisation as we know it”

“Is my microphone on? Can you hear me?”

Perhaps the most cringe-making moment in recent UK political history – and there are plenty of candidates for that award – was the unanimous cry of “YES”, from the assembled members of parliament. Hypocrites down to the last cheer. You have to gag.

So what of the sustainability community? I’m pretty sure most of us started out with good intentions. But I think we have gone about it the wrong way. We have spread our efforts thinly over a vast array of issues.

Take a look at a typical company sustainability report. The contents list will include a long list of environmental and social issues, each with its own set of sub-headings, metrics, targets and highlight examples. All wrapped in a viscous layer of management process. Not quite ready to set an absolute CO₂ target? Oh well, let’s feature volunteering this year. And so it goes on. Doing some good here and there, but not conclusively dealing with the problem threatening our existence. Can you name the companies that have cut their absolute carbon footprint while growing their business? These should be our role models.

By trying to tackle everything at once we're diluting our impact, giving too much weight to secondary issues and too little to the really big one.

We must stop talking about water, plastic, diversity, workers' rights, and volunteering. These are housekeeping issues. Just get on and do them quietly. We need all our energy, resources and focus on climate change. Talk about nothing else, to your board, investors, political connections and customers. Measure your success in \$ and tons CO₂. If we beat climate change, we will automatically make many of the other problems better, and we will have re-established a collective belief that we can act to save our common future. Don't tell me if we can cut global CO₂ emission by half, we can't fix packaging.

With all our commercial, political, and popular energy behind climate change – exclusively – we might just stop it running away with itself, causing untold human misery and damage to nature. If I was thinking of starting a family now, I'd think pretty hard.

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