

7. The Environment



Our most basic duty as citizens of the Earth is to leave a healthy, inhabitable planet for future generations. Statistics from IF and the Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development (FDSD) have shown that 45% of Britons believe that this is more important than a thriving economic legacy (only 9%). However, our current consumption of fossil fuels and the amount of carbon we are releasing into the atmosphere is creating a potential inheritance of environmental disaster.

Earlier generations had a blind spot: they never anticipated a foreseeable future where fossil fuels might run out, and it is because of this that our entire industrialised civilisation is structured around non-sustainable resources. Our current supplies of coal, gas and oil are not only limited but damaging: they release greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. In May 2015 carbon dioxide (CO₂) concentration levels reached a record-breaking 400ppm (parts per million) globally in a month, when the safe level is deemed to be 350ppm. While this statistic doesn't imply any immediate detrimental effects, it serves as an ominous reminder that our energy consumption is continuing to grow at a rate that cannot be sustained by our planet.

These greenhouse gases are creating a global warming effect. Temperatures are now 0.6-0.7°C higher than pre-industrial averages and are continuing to rise. Scientists have predicted that a further 1.5°C rise will lead to the melting of the permafrost that covers 24% of the Northern Hemisphere. This could trigger the release of hundreds of gigatonnes of CO₂ and methane, heating the planet further. It is clear that our current consumption rates are damaging the planet, possibly beyond repair, and it is time to consider the alternatives.

On top of this, there are now more people inhabiting the Earth than ever before. In 1960 there were 3 billion people on the planet; now there are 7 billion. 135 million children are born each year, and 55 million people die; that's a yearly net gain of 80 million people. As we become more industrialised, we demand more energy and release more carbon dioxide into

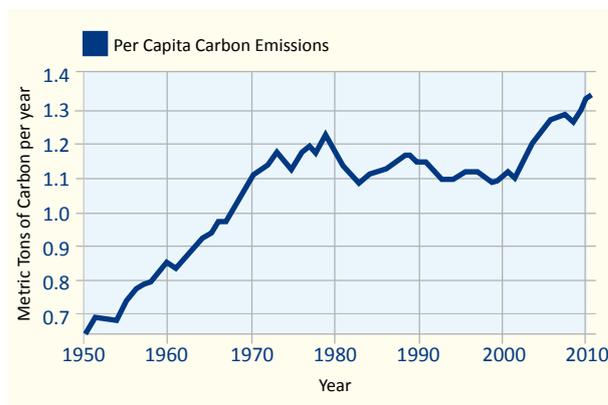


Fig 1. Global Carbon Dioxide Emissions per Capita, 1950-2010 (Source: Boden, Marland and Andres)

the atmosphere. In simple terms, we are living beyond our means. The Living Planet Report has calculated that at today's average global rate of consumption we would need 1.5 Planet Earths to provide for everybody sustainably. That's only taking into consideration those alive today; what about future generations?

The fear is that there may come a time when irreversible damage has been done; this is known as a tipping point. Global climate patterns are established through various events that are linked in all sorts of complex ways. Within these links there are delicate pressure points that, when interrupted, can cause huge amounts of damage with unpredictable results. These climate tipping points are linked to droughts, melting ice, the disruption of ocean currents, dying forests and changing ecosystems. If we continue to live the way we do now, the damage we cause could be catastrophic for future generations, and indeed all forms of life on Earth.

However, we are not yet at that point and we are already beginning to make changes that could avert disaster. World investment in cleaner energy alternatives to fossil fuels, such as wind and solar, has increased by 17% since 2012. Recently Denmark managed to generate 140% of its daily national electricity needs from wind turbines, exporting the surplus to Germany, Norway and Sweden. Although this is far from the norm, it shows that running a country on sustainable energy is possible, rather than just an unattainable dream.

Progress in this field depends upon governments making long-term plans that consider not only us, but those that will follow. In fact, several countries are beginning to take steps to represent future generations officially. The German constitution includes a clause in which all politicians pledge to consider these generations by protecting the natural foundations of the world they will inherit. In 2008 the Hungarian government appointed the first Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations, the Green Ombudsman. In 2015 the Welsh Assembly passed “The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act”, establishing the role of Commissioner for Sustainable Futures to review all Welsh government policy in that light.

Globally, people are beginning to combat short-termism and to speak out for those who do not yet have a voice of their own. It is our intergenerational duty to protect the natural world, handing down a clean, healthy and sustainable planet to generations to come. On the whole, there is hope for future generations as we begin to discover and cultivate a more sustainable pattern of living, but we cannot lose sight of the environmental perils that still threaten the very survival of life on Earth. It is vital that governments serve not only those who will vote for them, but the entire country, the world, and its future.

Sources:

- Intergenerational Foundation and Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development (2011) *“Protecting the Planet Beats Economic Growth”* (online)
- Boden, T.A., G. Marland, and R.J. Andres (2010) *“Global, Regional, and National Fossil-Fuel CO₂ Emissions”* (online)
- World Wide Fund for Nature (2014) *“Living Planet Report”* (online)

Recommended Reading and Viewing:

- Rosling, Hans. (2010) *“Global population growth, box by box”*, Ted Talks (online)
- World Wide Fund for Nature (2009) *“Major Tipping Points in the Earth’s Climate System and the Consequences for the Insurance Sector”* (online)