

It's Still Not Enough: Comments on the Paris Climate Accord



The long-awaited Paris Climate Accord has been finished and is [widely reported](#) to be the most successful and ambitious international climate agreement ever. The most important and cited number from the agreement is the goal of limiting the warming of the planet to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. This is ambitious and a better result than even many of the most optimistic observers had predicted. It's still not nearly enough.

The 1.5 degree figure is enormously out of whack with the actual national plans submitted by each of the signatory nations, which would allow out least 2.7 degrees of warming even if all measures were implemented (and that is, of course,

a significant “if”). Add to the fact that the conference was heavily influenced (and partly sponsored) by fossil fuel industries and that the words “fossil fuels”, “coal”, or “oil” appear anywhere in the document, and you can see that there are at least a few reasons to be skeptical of the positive press the agreement has received.

Among committed environmental activists, there are mixed reviews about the Paris Climate Accord, and different schools of thought about the necessary solutions to save the world from becoming one big, real-life Mad Max movie. While reasonable people would obviously agree that the results of the conference are better than nothing, no one who studies environmental issues thinks the agreement is anything more than a toothless statement of non-legally-binding promises that continue to explicitly put profit and national interest above the livability of our planet.

Naomi Klein has written one of the most talked about and controversial books about global warming causes and solutions in her recent book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs The Climate*. As stated in the subtitle, she claims that the cause of our problems is the system of global capitalism itself, and the solution is to usher in a new system that values local environmental sustainability over the endless, all-consuming, and all-destroying system economic growth at all costs. It is a compelling argument, and I’m sure that she is right on some level.

Bill McKibben, a leading environmental activist who is responsible for galvanizing opposition to the infamous Keystone XXL pipeline (which was defeated), [comments](#) that the terms of the Paris agreement are only a starting point which should give activists renewed vigor and moral imperative to hold international leaders to their words. Basically, to refuse to let the politicians and industries off the hook for weak, slow, and unenforceable promises to pollute slightly less than usual.

Real change always comes from a combination of bottom-up activism and top-down leadership. This is especially the case for such an enormous world-wide problem as warming climate, which will create the biggest and most dangerous environmental changes our species has witnessed in the last 70,000 years or so (since a huge volcanic eruption almost wiped us out and led to a genetic bottleneck in the last wave of migrations out of Africa). Top-down leadership exists or increases only in direct proportion to the amount of activism and public outcry that force political leaders to act. Their natural impulse is generally not to act, or to act only for the benefit of themselves or the most deep-pocketed lobbyists; in order to keep up and increase the momentum for better national and international climate policies, environmental organizations and activist groups must put more and more pressure on politicians to uphold their promises. The success of the Keystone pipeline campaign was symbolic as a turning point for activists to see real-world results and to begin to turn the narrative against the use of fossil fuels. Other examples include the protests and kayak blockade of Shell's latest arctic drilling rig before it was set to explore for oil under the Arctic Ocean (the project was cancelled, along with all future explorations in the frozen ocean due to the changing political and economic calculus away from fossil fuels), and the ongoing battle against natural gas fracking by citizens who refuse to accept polluted drinking water and daily earthquakes for a few cents of savings at the gas pump. It goes without saying that people are responsible for their own elected leaders, so if our politicians do not lead on climate change or even acknowledge its existence, it is on us to vote for new ones who do promise to lead (this obviously eliminates any [Republicans](#) from being worthy of consideration in America). For interested readers, here are just a few actions one can take to affect climate change and lower your ecological footprint.

On Eating Ecologically

Besides becoming a vocal activist or voting once every two years, there are various things people can and must do to turn the tables away from catastrophic warming. The bottom-up part of the equation goes beyond just turning off lights when you leave the room. It will require real sacrifice and a totally altered sense of priorities by those of us most responsible for pollution and global warming in the rich industrialized nations. One example is change of diet. Meat consumption must be reined in dramatically. This is not an option, but a necessity. When even that paragon of steroid-induced, action-film machismo who is Arnold Schwarzenegger [starts saying](#) that people need to eat less meat, you know it is beyond debate. Global livestock production is an enormous contributor to global warming through methane and nitrogen emissions, not to mention being a hugely inefficient use of our resources. It takes something like 100 times the amount of grain and water to produce one kilo of meat than it does to just eat the grain. I have been strictly vegan for several years (I wrote about the reasons why in greater detail [here](#)), and many other people will have to give up meat and animal products as much as possible in order to make real progress towards a more sustainable future.

On Saving (and Spending) Money Ecologically

Another massively important thing you as citizens and consumers can do besides voting every couple years is become actively interested and involved in how you spend your money. That could mean moving your bank account away from a big name-brand corporation that invests in things like fossil fuel development and arms producers towards small, local credit unions or other ethical choices. In Italy, there is a very good bank called Banca Etica that I use, and there are similar options in other countries if you look. Food shopping is a daily event where you can make a big impact. Switching to organic fruits and vegetables, buying local products as much as possible, and generally not buying anything from

multinational name brand companies has a two-fold effect: it helps the environment and the economy (which is linked, obviously), and it takes away money from the companies who contribute most to environmental destruction. For example, organic produce ensures that soil-killing fertilizers and fauna-poisoning pesticides are not used, as well as helping to resist the forest and soil-killing monocultural agriculture practices that have boomed in the post-war decades.

On Being a More Ecologically-Minded Consumer

If you are buying wood products, look for the [FSC](#) label which helps ensure that that forestry is done on a sustainable basis. If you must eat seafood, look for the [MSC](#) label which helps protect against overfishing (but, again, best to avoid all fish). Inform yourself in general about what you buy so that you are not contributing in some small part to things like the massive destruction of the rainforest in Indonesia and other countries for the sake of palm oil. Do not buy products with palm oil at all, which means cutting Nutella from your guilty pleasures. If you look, there is always a better option available, and savings of a few cents do not outweigh the ruination of natural habitats. In many respects, your dollar is more powerful than your vote, so use it properly. Without even mentioning the big tickets items (such as investing in green energy, green cars, and green houses), these are just a few indicative examples of what individuals can do in their daily lives to help inch gradually towards a collective global solution.

Do you know anyone who has been personally affected by a hurricane, flooding, forest fire, or drought in recent years? That answer will increasingly become yes for everyone as these events become more common, more powerful, and more destructive in the coming years, decades, and centuries. I want to live, and for my children to live, in a world where those existential threats are as minimized and controlled as possible, even if they are in large part locked in due to

warming that has already occurred. This is no longer a drill, an option, or a belief; it is an imperative by us humans who have created these changing conditions. The Paris Conference agreement is undoubtedly a positive first step, though it is already a couple decades too late. It is also a weak and tentative first step that needs to quickly become a leap. It goes without saying that this is the death knell for the fossil fuel economy; if it means we also have to find a more sustainable alternative to rampant global capitalism, so be it. Nothing can continue to grow unimpeded forever, neither an interconnected world economy nor, if we do not take the proper steps to increase momentum after the historical Paris Climate Accord, a species like *homo sapiens*.