

Shipwrecked: The climate and my mind

By Simon Pelletier

When I sit and think about the future. I think about the climate and what may or may not happen to it. We've spent a lot of time telling ourselves that climate change, the warming of the atmosphere through the emission of CO_2 , will have a deleterious effect on the natural world, and by extension, humanity. The reason I am dwelling on this is because I'm beginning to see the change unfold right in front of me.

Science has some strong conclusions on what *could* occur and what *is* occurring, but not on what *will* occur. They say that ninety nine percent of scientists believe that climate change is occurring and it will be problematic for the environmental systems contained within earth. I believe that most of them are more informed than I am.

The current level of warming is approximately 1.2 celsius. Impacts on weather that have occurred so far include: increasing frequency of droughts, heatwaves, wet events, as well as typhoons and hurricanes. The Greenland and Antarctic sheets are melting at an increased pace, with the ocean having risen ten centimetres from 1990 - 2020. The ocean temperature has increased as well, potentially contributing to an unprecedented coral reef die off. The increasing ocean acidification due to the rising temperature has increased ocean "dead zones," where oxygen levels are precipitously low. Most aquatic life cannot live in these aptly named "dead zones."

The increasing amount of vegetation due to a warming climate is called *global greening*. Researchers suggest warming and increased CO_2 concentration will cause more greening but with a reduction in yields and an overall loss in agricultural production. This is occurring alongside increasing heatwaves and droughts impacting ecosystems in neighbouring areas. Some subtropic areas have experienced desert expansions. The future balance of the opposing effects is uncertain. There is a case to be made that land *could* be more productive going forward – a *big* maybe though.

The risks to our current agricultural system and city infrastructure, which is predominantly in low lying coastal regions, is severe! With the majority of the biggest impacts coming to regions that are not very economically advantaged. These are typically places closer to the tropics, where warming will lead to severe crop devastation and coastal sea rise. Basically think of climate change as the tropics fleeing to both poles. All species are trying to find cooler weather. The north and south pole species will have no where to go so they will die

out and get replaced. The rest of the species will simply swap spots; although there is potential for species not being able to move to cooler climates fast enough and simply dying out. The next hundred years will see an increasing frequency of extreme natural disasters and environmental stressors. These events of "nature" will continue to stress all systems that humans have built on earth. The likely scenario is political instability and mass migrations north and south.

This can all be quite stressful if I dwell on the future scenarios too much. However there is a solution! *Optimism*. For me, I like to have actionable steps that can be taken to combat the nihilism. This essay is an attempt at providing a sense of optimism in my life and action for the future. Positions I can take now in my day to day, as well as a political and scientific framework that I can deploy in social interaction to combat some of the pessimism and anxiety I face from my peers and society.

Will lifestyle choices make a significant contribution to reducing climate change?

My premise for this is the following. We consume oil and gas in basically everything we use. And so it makes sense to think about our impact in simple dollar terms. The more dollars we spend the more oil and gas we use and the more co2 we emit. That's an "*in general*" statement. The nuance here is that with effort and conscious consideration we can funnel our money into products and modes of production that use less fossil fuel. This is achieved by shrinking our economic arms and reaching for local goods. Or inversely we figure out how to make it more sustainable for our arms to reach out across the world for goods we desire, through the use of renewable energy technology and ingenious thinking.

The problem with the current state of the world is that products, both local or International, still contain a large co2 footprint because most of their inputs will reduce to oil and gas. For example a locally manufactured spoon contains ore that still needs to be harvested with a machine that burns oil and then ideally forged in a factory powered by hydro and not shipped too far. An improvement because we skipping the co2 from the shipping the iron ore to China and the spoon back to us. But not fully solved due to the fossil fuel machines we use here.

The effort required to fully vet a "green" purchase isn't a reasonable activity to do for each and every economic choice we all make on a daily basis. And so we need to pick our battles in this arena. Ideally we push a green agenda and organizations take on the task of categorizing and listing market participants as being aligned with mitigating climate change or not.

Most will feel at odds with the proposition that the less you spend the less CO₂ you emit. Reason being is that we all want to spend more and to live larger lives. Everything we see and feel in culture drives this desire. Consumer Capitalism is certainly responsible for this issue. The more we consume the more money a company can make. However this critical observation never looks at the other side of the equation – that as we improve production techniques and technology we can consume more for less. An example is the soda can. Since the 1990s the carbon intensity of producing an aluminum can has been reduced by approximately forty percent. Considered thought paired with technological progress has led to each of us consuming half the amount of carbon in our beer and soda consumption. There are many examples of this kind.

The faith in the market isn't a complete one though. Humans tend to consume as much as they possibly can. We let our income and not our needs dictate consumption patterns. And so the tendency for the capitalist market to provide goods efficiently on average tends to individuals pursuing more and not less. I've noticed this in my own life, even with my frugal proclivities. The soda can uses half the resources it used to use and the price reflects this. Instead of leaving that half in the ground we drink two cans of soda a day instead of one.

There is a solution to this problem of wanting to consume. But I shall save it for the end of the essay.

If lifestyle change doesn't make a big enough impact to effect the current climate change paradigm perhaps my efforts have social influence?

There is an argument against the position that lifestyle changes matter. Some would say that the whole system is so entrenched in fossil fuel that a simple adjustment of an individual's consumption patterns doesn't have a noticeable effect on output. The capitalist system is so structured around oil and gas that we would need a top down approach, a giant restructuring driven by government and industry. As opposed to a grassroots movement from bottom up.

I'm sympathetic to this position. I've spent a lot of my twenties thinking about the economic engine. I have a degree in economics. The system is has strong incentives that propagates the status quo.

I propose a lifestyle that focuses on reducing one's CO₂ impact will have a net positive effect. If you take action to reduce your footprint you have to do a collection of things that

your peers will notice. Here is a small list: bike to events instead of driving, avoid excessive airplane use, eat less meat, buy used items, purchase high quality items that can be repaired, choose social activities that build community, cook and share food with your peers, volunteer instead of going somewhere and spending money, don't consume but create, make art, make things from trash, repurpose stuff others would throw away, learn to perform. These activities will be noticed by your peers. Actions speak louder than words. They will eventually want to know what is driving(not a car!) this behaviour. You will be able to tell them because you have invited them over for dinner – plenty of time to win them over to your side.

And so it's a win-win kind of situation because even if your lifestyle changes don't "move the needle" on climate change. You've at least had an effect on the people around you. If enough of us see the problem and want a solution we can force our politicians and the people in power to see and address these problems. The network effect of this is exponential due to the compounding nature of human interactions. And we rarely have a good intuitive sense for how powerful the exponential is.

The downside is the same as the last point: not being able to consume as much as a human might desire. And as I said before, I have a solution to this problem! I shall save the positivity for the conclusion.

Is a life that "moves the needle" on climate change a reasonable path?

As my friend Lyndon says, "what about moving the needle!"

Instead of worrying about whether our lifestyle choices are making a large or small impact on climate change we can instead focus on shifting the economic engine. Continue your high consumption life and start a solar installation company that makes a noticeable impact on how energy is produced. Invent a recycling process that reduces how much of something we need to produce. Work on a thinner popcan and save humanity.

Ideally these impacts will outweigh the impact you could have made by selling your car and eating beans.

This is a valid approach.

How to deal with your own hypocrisy.

There is a lot of hypocrisy around a stance that entails reducing emissions in ones life. How

can I possibly apply this locally produced, arms length, consumption pattern in a globally integrated world? I can't. And so there will be an endless collection of material possessions and activities I will partake in that don't fulfill my ideal requirements. As with most issues, becoming a fundamentalist doesn't acknowledge the shades of grey that life presents. Instead I hold these tenants as tightly as I can without berating each and every relationship I have, be it with people or objects. I try to embody the principles and push the boundaries of what is comfortable while also acknowledging that I cannot be some endless bulwark for climate change. I pick my battles, make my case and try to live a life I will look back on with a smile and a nod of the head.

The pessimism baked into climate change.

The pessimism comes from the intractable nature of the problem. Because fossil fuels are so integral to how our economy functions we cannot fathom how we will stop using them. And so, when we are told we have to change in less than thirty years, we are unable to believe it is achievable.

The problem with a pessimistic view, while most likely a very rational perspective in this case, is that it doesn't lead to a very enjoyable state of being. With each natural disaster reported in the media we are plunged into an ever descending tailspin. The rationalist thinks that it's unlikely society can rectify this issue and that she will burn in one last fiery roar.

While climate change is of pressing global concern it is also wise to realize that most, if not all, of the media we consume is incentivized to publish negative and anxiety inducing information. We as humans are evolutionary constructed to be much more aware of the potential lion waiting around the corner, ready to tear our windpipe out, than we are to pay much heed to a plant bearing fruit we can eat. And so while it is perhaps good that we pay more attention to the potential downsides of climate change. We also need to realize that as humans we aren't structured to be very optimistic. And that our current media landscape isn't incentivized to present us with much hope.

I would prefer to be a slightly irrational optimist than to be a completely rational pessimist. If I believe that we can achieve a livable situation in the future, even given hard truths, then I have something to aim at. Even if it involves suffering and sacrifice. Perhaps I am staring at climate change through rose-tinted glasses and in my eighth decade I will look back at my youthful self and think, "he sure was optimistic." But I'd rather do that than live in nihilistic misery now.

The only problem that could come from not having an overly pessimistic view is the lack of action that may come from thinking everything is going to be fine. Optimism for our society adapting to environmental changes and accepting climate migrants with open arms and acknowledging we are all in this together is a position I shall take. As opposed to an optimism that everything will be just fine – frankly it never is, even without climate catastrophe.

The positive aspect of a reduction in lifestyle expense and the modern humans endless consumption.

Let's imagine a specific person in a specific place with a specific life and then we shall extend this out to include all of us.

Here is a life.

She lives in a home in a part of the city where she wants to spend her time. She walks to work – it fills her with joy to look up at the trees in the morning, to feel the crisp cool air on her face. Biking in the summer. Bundling up in the winter. There are many people she spends time with who are a ten minute walk away. She works a job that brings her some amount of pleasure, but she's pragmatic and knows that work isn't everything. Back at home there are a collection of people in the household. They make plans to cook dinners for each other. Community and connection right inside the back door. Little effort, some stress, just basic family style living. YES you do have to navigate the space. YES you do have to do the dishes when you don't want to. YES your neighbour makes noise late at night. YES you have to go to work in the morning. But the alternative is social isolation and endless burning of fuel. A select few of us can live a life fully alone, but I posit that it's not for most humans. In the evenings she goes to the library to get a book. Perhaps to read fiction or to learn some new pursuit she has. She sews clothes to express herself and to look stylish. Friends come over and they make baked goods at a fraction of the cost that can be had at the place down the street. Community building, social caring, laughter, human touch and a freezer full of good food. And instead of spending your excess income on endless possessions you learn to make, to build and enjoy human connection. The goal is to reduce your yearly costs by *at least* half. Those savings can be put aside for retirement. Twenty years of this is plenty for a full retirement funded by an investment account. If capitalism fails or this approach becomes so mainstream we can't live off of dividends, then we have practiced a life of frugality and creation, social interaction and simple living; all the skills we will need in this new post-capital society. A returning to our roots perhaps?

This kind of lifestyle is all about doing. It's all about shrinking down the circle of our

existence to within walking and biking distance. We can occasionally make use of the car and the airplane but we don't do it daily, or even monthly. We craft that smaller life and we are better for it. More focused and more creative, more energy to put out into the people, and the places, we love. And in doing so we can align with a reduction in co2 as well. A two birds one stone sort of situation.

That is my hope at least.