

# What if Climate Change Weren't Happening?

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.2 (posted on 16 April 2019)*  
*© 2019 by the author, all rights reserved*

This week's commentary is a brief thought experiment — a “what-if?” scenario that is both hypothetical and fictional.

What if climate change weren't happening? What if the increasing concentration of carbon and other greenhouse gases released into the atmosphere by human activity in modern civilization were not affecting the earth in such a way as to cause a serious rise in average global temperatures? What if the feedback loops that accelerate climate shift toward ever more extreme and abrupt climatic disruption weren't triggered? What if we weren't facing catastrophe for civilization and the possible extinction of our own species from the conditions of a hotter biosphere, hot enough so as to make the earth effectively uninhabitable for human beings?

In this make-believe what-if scenario, I'm banishing only the single factor of global warming. Nothing else is different than in our present reality.

In other words, my scenario presumes that the massive ice sheets at the Arctic Ocean around the earth's north pole and covering the entire continent of Antarctica at the southern pole would not be melting, nor that the permafrost in the arctic region would be thawing. Thus, the oceans would not rise, the drowning of major, low-lying coastal cities would not occur, and the largest refugee crisis in human history would be averted. Similarly, the methane stored within the permafrost and in the floor of the Arctic Ocean would not be released into the atmosphere. As a greenhouse gas, methane is 30 times more potent than carbon dioxide and one of the most dramatic and devastating feedback loops that could accelerate climate change to abrupt and catastrophic levels. In the scenario, that too would not happen.

Does this mean that, in my admittedly fictional scenario, we would no longer be at risk and have nothing to worry about concerning humanity's future? Sadly, that is not the case. Removing the looming specter of catastrophic climate change through global warming is not in itself sufficient to provide us with safety. Not even close.

Dropping out climate change from our current and increasingly perilous situation would not ameliorate or diminish various other dangers. These include extractive industries (mining and metallurgy), excessive use of concrete (with which we are entombing the biosphere), deforestation (to reap wood for industry and increase agricultural land), toxic chemicals (pesticides, heavy metals, etc.), plastics (which are killing the oceans), and wholesale habitat destruction (accompanied by a loss of biodiversity through species extinctions), to name just some.

Each of these disturbed and accelerating human activities and their repercussions has been written about at great length. I don't feel a need to discuss them one by one in this short essay. All of it boils down to a single motivation: perpetual economic growth. We are addicted to more — ever more. Infinite growth is a precondition of our current economic systems, loosely aggregated under the heading of capitalism. The stunning wrong-headedness of such a perspective is becoming more obvious with each passing year, although too many of those with a vested interest in maintaining our current course continue to deny that, failing to understand the obvious truth, namely, that we are promoting ecocide — destruction of the very environment that supports and sustains us.

Why is this so? One reason is greed, of course, but the causes for our environmental myopia go far deeper than that, back to the roots of civilization.

There is no compelling evidence of spiritual arrogance in the archaeological record of humanity's long gestation as hunter-gatherers living in small kinship bands. When agriculture and personal ownership of land and resources kick-started civilization 12,000 years ago, we headed down a very different road, one that has led us to the dilemmas we face now. Since civilization took hold as the dominant structure of society, human beings have been increasingly encouraged to consider ourselves separate from nature and superior to all other life forms on earth. We have come to regard nature as a primal and unpredictable force that is to be, if not vanquished, at least tamed. We have longed to establish our dominance and control.

The dogmas of organized religion — particularly in Christianity — included narratives that painted human beings as the Crown of Creation, relegating all other species on our amazing Goldilocks planet to inferior status far beneath ours. We did not recognize, acknowledge, nor appreciate the astonishing and vibrant interdependence of all life on earth.

Despite the importance of balance and harmony emphasized in various spiritual traditions, the industrious, individualistic, and materialist cultures of the west have not embraced such values. Instead, we've plunged ahead, letting our cleverness and ingenuity play out in any way they can, without regard for the consequences. We've chosen not to restrain ourselves, nor to honor reasonable limits in what we create. Yes, questions are always raised in some sectors of

society about the long-term repercussions of such headlong pursuits, but those concerns are typically minimized or ignored in favor of economic expansion.

These fundamental (and outrageous) presumptions — that we are superior to other species, that we are not truly part of nature on this planet, and that balance and harmony in the interdependence of life on earth do not matter — lie at the heart of our troubles.

If climate change weren't happening, we would still be in dire straits. The proposals so far discussed to minimize global warming — carbon taxes, electric cars, the green new deal, and many more "solutions" that will inevitably emerge in the near future as environmental conditions worsen — are well-intentioned, but they don't address what is at the core of our troubles, and none of them will succeed in insuring our survival.

Humanity is very quickly approaching the great crossroads. If we don't transition out of our brief (12,000 years) period of creative but disturbed adolescence, and particularly the past two centuries of utter madness, we are, quite likely, doomed. Like every species that becomes too successful too fast and thus disrupts the balance and harmony of nature, we will get our comeuppance and probably go extinct.

In stating this opinion, I'm not implying that some moral agent will punish us for our sins. Instead, I consider it simply the way life on earth works. Disharmony cannot last forever. Balance will be restored, one way or another. Humanity has the choice to do that ourselves, by changing what we believe and how we live, or it will be done for us and to us.

I'd like to think that we might have at least some miniscule chance for the former rather than the latter, but I'm not optimistic about that.