

THERE IS NO PLANET B

Two years ago a consortium of scientists decided that it would be important to calculate when, at what level of CO₂, we could expect a tipping point when the concentration of CO₂ would be so high that it would set off other processes of unknown severity. I think of it as the “point of no return” as it is called in aviation: when an airplane is low on fuel there is a point at which it is impossible to get back to refuel, and it must continue, possibly crash. The scientists determined that the magic number was 350 parts per million (350 parts of CO₂ per million parts of air).

Today, 25 October 2009, the number is already 387 (a month ago it was 385). That means we have passed the point of no return. BUT, people who know about these things say that it is still possible to get back to that magic number 350, if we act right now, today. That is what governments, rulers, will be talking about in Copenhagen a little more than a month from now

Carbon dioxide, CO₂, comes from burning oil, gas, and coal. We’ve been doing that more and more, faster and faster, for the last few hundred years, but particularly in the last 60 years after World War II. I think it was last year that China passed the United States in being the greatest polluter of the planet, but China has one fifth of the population of the world. The United States has one twenty-fifth of the population of the world, and we are a very close second. Proportionately, per person, Americans poison the atmosphere immensely more than anyone else in the world.

CO₂ is not unnatural, it is one of the chemicals that plants use to grow, and plants, trees, anything green, makes oxygen that we and other beings breathe to live. One could say that plants and trees eat CO₂. That is why destroying forests is another major cause of the increase of CO₂ in the atmosphere. Half of the earth’s rain forests have been destroyed. In fact, that is probably what caused climate change as the first noticeable effect of global warming. Global warming melts ice, all ice — not only of the two poles, but the ice locked up in glaciers that are the source of rivers everywhere, and even the invisible ice that has kept tundras frozen, called permafrost (permanently frozen)., Not permanent any

more. Reforestation on a huge scale would absorb some of the extra CO₂, but it takes time for trees, even plants to grow.

It also takes time to reduce our reliance on oil, gas, and coal — all of which are used to make electricity which makes possible our way of life, our standard of living.

How could we live without electricity to refrigerate or freeze food, wash clothes, dry clothes, heat and cool houses, cars, buses, airplanes, office buildings? Electricity runs our computers, phones, television, music players. It irons our clothes. In short, modern man could not live without electricity. Or rather, we could not continue to live as we have become accustomed to live.

Even a hundred years ago we used a tiny fraction of the electricity we now use to maintain our civilization. Even fifty years ago, in my life time, we lived very well without enormous freezers, dryers, air conditioning, super markets that were kept cold to keep vegetables looking fresh. We didn't complain; it was a good life. We lived in houses not even half the size of the average house today. We lived closer together, we knew our neighbors, helped each other. We did not have forests of sky scrapers (I like that word better than high rises) that require large amounts of electricity just to move people and all their daily requirements up and down, not to mention the lights. Fifty years ago you could see stars even in cities. Today, people in any of the twenty or thirty mega-cities of the world have not seen stars for at least ten years.

In America we have accepted that we need one car per person. Everywhere else in the world people share rides, use excellent and ubiquitous public transportation, ride a bike and even walk to work. The American car manufacturers convinced us some years ago that everybody needed SUVs or trucks. They did not mention, of course, that SUVs, large 7-passenger buses, could be built on a truck chassis and so require fewer safety measures than passenger cars. Profitable to put SUVs on a truck chassis but charge the price of a many-passenger car. We imagined that big is safer, but not so. Big is less maneuverable and the last decade has shown there are other dangers. Of course, as we should have learned by now, the Media reports for the big corporations, so the foolishness of SUVs and monstrous trucks has never been news.

What we, Americans, should do, of course, is radically change our life style. We should learn to live again as we did fifty years ago. Small houses, small cars, more sweaters in winter rather than more heat in the house. We should eat healthier food that is grown nearby, not produced in a factory thousands of miles away. We should ride bicycles to work, hang wash out on a line outside, or in the bathroom as we did then. Turn the lights off when we leave a room.

But I know and you know that “should” is a bad word.

We hardly ever do what we should do. We get very upset when someone tells us what to do. “I make up my own mind, thank you!”

All right. So, there is no should.

We’ll make up our mind how to deal with climate change when we get to it. Bill McKibben, talking in Sydney,, Australia, not long ago, said 65%, say two thirds, of Americans still think that global warming, climate change, is not a big problem. We are too busy watching a new government fighting the corporations to get better health insurance, perhaps even better health care. We are fighting two wars in a part of the world that seems to be exploding (and the way we fight wars emits a lot of CO₂). And all of the many wars we are fighting are going badly, or very badly.

The majority of Americans probably still think global warming is something for our kids or grandchildren to worry about. Toward the end of the century. Actually, scientists find every day that climate change is happening much faster than they predicted even yesterday. Instead of the rest of the century we may have only a few years.

Americans, 4% of all humans, are almost alone in the world to believe that climate change does not need attention now. My reading suggests that everybody else in the world has experienced and/or is convinced that what is happening to the planet is indeed the most dangerous change that has happened in the last two or three thousand years.

It gives me the shivers to think that 65% of 4% — that is 2.6% of all humans — can influence, maybe prevent, action of a majority of humans who are eager to do what they can to at least slow down the enormous effects of climate change.

It seems obvious to me (and to most of the people of the planet) that this country, responsible for a quarter of the poisons we — 4% of all humans — continue to blow into the atmosphere, must give the lead, be an example. Can we live with the knowledge that we are part of a very small minority of all humans that may be powerful enough to make timely action impossible? And without timely action — if we were to stay at 387 parts per million, or go above that — there is a real possibility that Man and a whole slew of other animals will disappear from this planet. Forever.

Of course, if you are in the two thirds of Americans who still don't "believe" in global warming, manifesting as climate change, you won't believe what I say either.

Have a nice day....

Sources:

<http://www.350.org/>

http://fora.tv/2009/05/06/Bill_McKibben_350_The_Most_Important_Number_in_the_World#The_Earths_Tipping_Point_350_Parts_Per_Million_CO2

<http://www.wildwolff.com/essays/change.pdf>

I did not invent the title of this writing. It flashed by on one of the many, many pictures of the "350" event, held in 170 countries, yesterday, 23 october 2009. It struck me because it says so elegantly that *this planet is our only home*.