

Urgent Action Now the Prescription for Planetary Health

By Thomas Beck, AIA, NCARB

Democracy is a messy business. The leaders of the world are once again meeting to address climate change at the COP26 summit in Glasgow, negotiating actions we need to take to prevent our planets temperatures from rising above 1.5 degrees centigrade. The autocrats and authoritarians don't care.

A few of the autocrats did not bother to show up. Russia's tundra is on fire, literally, and China is ramping up its coal production. "China's extra coal by itself would increase humanity's output of planet-warming carbon dioxide by a full percentage point."

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/01/world/chinas-push-to-burn-more-coal-puts-climate-goals-at-risk.html>) The International Energy Agency (IEA) released a report recently which says "For all the advances being made by renewables and electric mobility, 2021 is seeing a large rebound in coal and oil use. Largely for this reason, it is also seeing the second-largest annual increase in CO2 emissions in history." (IEA (2021), World Energy Outlook 2021, IEA, Paris <https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-outlook-2021>)

China, not a democracy, does not have the annoying need to negotiate when making decisions like this. According to reporting on the PBS Newshour, "In 2020 alone, the country brought 38.4 gigawatts of new coal-fired capacity into operation. That's more than three times the amount built in the rest of the world over the same period" Our US Climate Envoy John Kerry put it this way: "If China sticks with its current plan and does not peak its emissions until 2030, then the entire rest of the world would have to go to zero, zero by 2040 or even 2035." (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/chinas-timeline-to-ditch-coal-adopt-green-technology-may-be-too-slow-to-help-climate>)

There are other countries that are not technically autocracies that are not stepping up to the urgent need for action. And we have our own messy democracy to navigate in order to make the commitments we must act on fast, to ensure a future for ourselves, our children and theirs, that includes a planet as beautiful and life sustaining as the one we live on now.

So democracies, we are on our own. Not only do we have to clean up our own horrifying messes, but we will have to make up for the autocracies that refuse to view themselves as a part of this beautiful and fragile planet. If we don't take those actions, it will be our own tundra flaming.

In better news, the COP26 did manage to iron out a Global Methane Pledge, committing to a 30 percent reduction in methane emissions. A proposed new Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) rule "will reduce 41 million tons of methane...the equivalent of 920 tons of carbon dioxide. That is more than carbon dioxide emitted by all passenger cars and commercial aircraft." Although methane dissipates much more quickly than carbon dioxide emissions, it can warm the atmosphere 80 times as fast as carbon dioxide in the short term. In a refreshing acknowledgment of its industry's responsibilities to its fellow citizens, and its ability to innovate "The American Petroleum Institute, a trade group that represents the oil and natural gas industry, called the E.P.A. proposal "sweeping" and pledged to work with the agency to "help shape a final rule that is effective, feasible and designed to encourage further innovation." (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/02/world/europe/climate-summit-methane-forests.html>)

The other major agreement to come out of COP26 was a pledge by more than 100 countries to end deforestation by 2030. This would protect about 85 percent of the world's forests. As we know, forests absorb carbon dioxide and slow global warming. The pillage of pristine forests to satisfy our global demand for commodities which are energy intensive and not ecologically sensible is a major issue. Brazil is one of the signatories of the COP26 deforestation agreement, which is significant since Brazil is one of the major players in deforestation.

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/28/world/americas/brazil-deforestation-amazon-bolsonaro.html>)

It remains to be seen whether Brazil will walk the talk.

Quoted in the October 2021 Energy Sage newsletter, this article says “Wind and solar power are now the cheapest source of new electricity in most markets and growing briskly.”

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/13/climate/global-fossil-fuel-use.html>) How do we wean ourselves from old technologies which served their purpose well when they were the only option? How to move forward from old technologies that are more expensive financially and harm the long-term health of each and every country and continent on this planet? We can find ways to support workers in transition to clean energy jobs. We can elect representatives who understand that our actions regarding climate matter. We can forge ahead with research and development of technologies that are innovative, that improve our lives and communities at the local level, at the federal level, and at the global level. We can encourage civic responsibility. We can take personal responsibility in our own daily actions to make good choices, for example by purchasing sustainably produced products, local if possible. We can each reduce our own personal carbon footprint.

This is not going to be easy. Our wellbeing depends on our commitment to changing bad habits we have developed since the beginning of the industrial revolution. We owe it to ourselves to do the hard work it will take to get it done.

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planetary-health/](https://www.eptrail.com/2021/11/03/urgent-action-now-the-prescription-for-planetary-health/)