

Letter to the TLS (published 14 August 2020):

It's encouraging to find climate change - or better, climate crisis - being discussed in the TLS (July 31), and both Bill McKibben and Gabrielle Walker are moving in the right direction. However, they also demonstrate how far they, and we, still have to go. For one thing, both write as if climate were the only problem that mattered when it is only one of a handful, all of them urgent. In fact, climate crisis, along with mass extinctions, crashing biodiversity and rampant pollution are all as much symptoms as they are causes of what McKibben and Walker completely ignore: the destruction and degradation of the Earth's remaining ecosystems as a direct result of overwhelming human impact as such. There are simply too many human beings, engaged in too many activities whose only rationale is economic, on this limited planet.

What is needed is therefore not merely 'greening' business but radically overhauling it, and tackling not only production but consumption. 'Clean' energy and renewables have their own destructive impacts, sometimes dire, and cumulatively they are so many fingers in the dyke unless demand for energy decreases. Electric cars have a big carbon footprint once you factor in their making, concomitant infrastructure, particulate emissions and so on. Meanwhile, the Paris Agreement, which Walker hails, has been a dismal failure and carbon emissions are still rising, along with meat-eating, forced conversion of wild forest to human use, plastic waste, and so-called 'development'. And even addressing all these will eventually avail nothing in the absence of radically increased female education, empowerment and access to birth-control, so the actual global population (not merely its rate of growth) can start to decline. Compared to this agenda, what Walker advocates is greenwashed business-as-usual. It only asks, 'What can we do in order to continue producing and consuming as much as we want?' But that's just what we can't continue doing.

The other glaring omission is even the slightest reference to the intrinsic value, integrity and dire plight of any other species. You would think, reading McKibben and Walker, that the Earth was home only to human beings, or that only they mattered. It is just this criminally deficient attitude and ethic, which goes under the name of anthropocentrism, that underpins ecocide. To the extent that the Earth and all its beings don't provide the context for our relevant deliberations and actions, those intended to save us will only continue to connive at the extermination of remaining wild animals and places. Indeed, they will even fail in their own terms; if the wild Earth goes down, so too, in the end, do we.

To be clear, I am not accusing McKibben and Walker of not discussing everything, but of not discussing what matters most. And this is not 'doomism'; it is pure realism.

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