

Climate note #5: “Your lifestyle or your life - physical and economic limits”

Thomas Lord *February 10, 2019, Berkeley, CA*

The consequences of global warming in excess of 1.5°C warming are horrific. Tragically, we are on a trajectory past 3°C warming, which will quickly lock in mass extinction, many millions of assured deaths, and significant uncertainty that civilization or even the human species can survive.

To have a chance at a 1.5°C limit, global emissions must be cut by approximately 50% by 2030, a mere 11 years away.¹ That goal is a 6% reduction per year, every year.

For us in the U.S, 6% per year is much too slow. We are the highest per capita emitter in the world. We are also in the most advantageous position to make immediate reductions. Equity concerns - such as the need of much of the Global South to develop sustainably - reinforce our obligation.

A **15% per year reduction** is not too much to ask.

Fly less? Change our diets a bit? Vote for public transit? What the IPCC has shown us, in 2018, is that the laws of physics can not wait for such long-range, pie-in-the-sky plans. If we delay sharp emissions reductions, chances to stop at 1.5°C are lost. We will still be on a path towards 3°C warming.

There will be no “catching up”, in other words. To miss this last remaining window of opportunity for serious change is to condemn many millions to death, and today’s children to misery.

It is true that, in principle, we know of “technological fixes”. For example, greatly improved public transit systems can sharply reduce emissions from cars. The principle is, at the moment, useless. It should be understood as a lament for not acting earlier. There is simply no economic possibility (in the broadest sense of “economic”) to build such a transit system in time.

In that one example of car travel we can, if we are willing to look, see something very profound about the physical and economic barriers we are up against.

- The laws of physics command a death-plagued, miserable single-lifetime future if we do nothing.
- There is no practical or economic means to substitute sustainable forms of public transit for cars fast enough.

No sugar-coating: the only choice that remains is to curtail driving with no substitute ready, and manage the harsh economic fallout as best we can.

¹Summaries of projections here generally refer to the analysis in the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* Special Report 15 (“Climate Change of 1.5°C”).

About this series

This is the first in a series of very short discussions of climate change, meant to be easily understood by a wide audience.

Please let me know if you spot errors, or have suggestions or questions. I will do my best to improve the notes and to issue corrections as necessary. I can be contacted at lord@basiscraft.com. Please put "climate:" at the beginning of the subject line.

Planned topics

- **Climate note #1: "The push for zero"**
The *gravity* of the situation.
- **Climate note #2: "The carbon budget"**
The *scarcity* of resources to solve the problem.
- **Climate note #3: "How soon until zero?"**
The *urgency* of successful action.
- **Climate note #4: "Mass die-offs? Extinction? Really?!?"**
The *importance* of acting.
- **Climate note #5: "Your lifestyle or your life - physical and economic limits"**
The *sacrifice* required (no sugar-coating).
- **Climate note #6: "Can't we just make our infrastructure green?"**
The *denialism* popularized by progressive politics.
- **Climate note #7: "What is to be done?"**
How to act wisely, together, in *solidarity*.
- **Climate note #8: "The genocide problem."**
Are we *monsters*?
- **Climate note #9: "Simple plans of action."**
A little *courage* is all we need to act.
- **Climate note #10: "Rejoice."**
A personal reflection.