

Earth ignores politics

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There has been a lot of flooding across the planet this spring. Perhaps because storm systems are traveling across the landscape less quickly and raining in the same place for longer. The day-to-day patterns of weather are so complicated that it is hard to see clearly how the global climate is changing. In addition, the seasonal changes are very large in New England, and the variation from year to year can be huge as global patterns shift. Just recall the last two winters.

Traditionally the climate of a region was defined in terms of the average seasonal cycle of temperature and precipitation over thirty-year periods, and changes from one period to the next were small. Now the climate is changing much faster than it did fifty years ago, as greenhouse gases are accumulating in the atmosphere, and the weather is changing with it. The future is always uncertain, but now it is becoming more uncertain. This is a big challenge for society.

We know in broad terms what we must do. Slow down, double the energy efficiency of our society and industry, and replace fossil fuels, which contain carbon that was removed from the air 300 million years ago, with renewable sources of energy.

Perhaps even harder for us is the patience, courage and persistence needed to follow this path for more than a generation in the face of chaotic climate extremes. We want instant results, instant gratification, but we are dependent on a planet that moves slowly. The Earth is still processing and trying to digest all the greenhouse gases we dumped into the air over the past hundred years. It is warming up slowly, storing heat in the oceans, evaporating more water and slowly melting icecaps to counter the fact that it is being heated by the sun, but it cannot cool as fast to space as it used to.

These are changes we have to accept because the Earth is far more powerful than human civilization. We have to work with the planet as it struggles to maintain ecosystem stability in the face of staggering pollution of the air, land, streams and oceans from our thoughtless disposable society.

It was our unmanaged technology that created this, and a century ago we were too excited by new possibilities and wealth to understand the consequences. It seems this is still true for many! Reports from scientific committees have been mapping the consequences in ever-increasing detail for nearly 40 years, but we keep ignoring them, hoping that the Earth will somehow ignore our pollution. But it cannot, and it is time to use our technology creatively, and move to a zero-waste economic system based on renewable energy.

It is futile to protest that this might cost a little more in the first decade, when the downstream costs of our present economic path, estimated to be over a thousand trillion dollars, will bankrupt our children as well as life on Earth. This is the frame of reference of one of the presidential candidates who made millions while bankrupting his casinos!

The Earth does not have a convenient bankruptcy court. Melting the icecaps, after ten thousand years of stability, will drown our coastal cities and ports. Shifting the climate of Vermont to that of northern Georgia will wipe out our forests, as well as our skiing. Extreme weather, spreading floods and droughts will bring misery, starvation and millions of refugees.

I am glad Vermont is leading New England in many ways, but the legislature failed to pass a carbon tax this year. I am glad climate change issues are in the election campaign, but the US Congress is still trying to destroy the beauty of our planet in deference to rich lobbyists and its nihilistic political creed.

It is time to wake up with a sigh, look at the green landscape of summer, the farms and crops we love, and build the communities we need.