

Kelman, I. 2007. "The Value of Climate Change". Disaster and Social Crisis Research Network Electronic Newsletter, no. 31 (July-September), p. 7.

Full Text

Climate change has been receiving plenty of publicity as not only a global crisis but also as perhaps the greatest global crisis which humanity has ever faced. There is little doubt that climate change resulting from human activity is threatening many ecosystems and many human settlements. From rapid species extinctions and biome shifts to evacuating coastlines and low-lying islands, greenhouse gas emissions, especially from using fossil fuels but also from other human activities, are a major culprit. Even if human greenhouse gas emissions were to total zero as of tomorrow, we would still be facing climate change's legacy for decades, possibly even centuries.

But if human-caused climate change could be miraculously halted tomorrow, would that solve the identified threats? A November 2006 fisheries study "projects the global collapse of all taxa currently fished by the mid-21st century" (Worm et al., 2006: 790) with the focus being overfishing, not climate change. Deforestation leads to landslide and flood disasters and is destroying ecosystems, as Curran et al. (2004) document for Borneo including inside protected areas.

Powerful interests behind overfishing and large-scale logging have even argued that climate change will ruin these resources, so humanity might as well exploit them now. Of course, without climate change, these interests would still be involved in these destructive activities and would still be ignoring the consequences.

So if human-caused (or natural) climate change were not of concern, humanity--at least, some sectors of humanity--would still sport impressive results in wrecking the environment. This value of immediate exploitation irrespective of the long-term costs is the same value which led to human-caused climate change: fossil fuels are cheap and easy-to-use now, so we must use as much as possible regardless of the consequences.

That means short-term gain for long-term pain. A slogan summarizes this value: "Earth First! We can strip-mine the other planets later".

Compared to the important, needed, and inspiring work ongoing for tackling climate change, how much effort is being put into tackling the root causes? That goes beyond greenhouse gases. Instead, that means changing the fundamental values which lead some of humanity to live completely out of balance with the environment, from the local level to the global level. Climate change is one manifestation amongst many of unsustainable environmental values.

The real crisis is how we think and act. The crisis is values, not climate change.

References

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