

TITLE: Declaration on Climate Change

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WE, THE UNDERSIGNED, CALL UPON THE world's political and corporate leaders to take immediate action to prevent seriously disruptive climate change. Evidence of human impact upon the Earth's climate is now irrefutable. We have emitted enough greenhouse gases into the atmosphere to commit the climate to change. If we carry on as we are, we can expect a rapidly worsening situation that — because of the long life of emissions in the atmosphere — will continue for centuries to come. Within a global trend of rising temperatures that could reach levels in the next century that our species has never previously experienced, our climate will become more and more unstable, marked by extreme and unseasonal weather.

Such climatic destabilisation will have dire consequences for every part of the world, every sector of society and every aspect of our lives. Our health and food supplies will be affected dramatically by increased droughts, heatwaves and the spread of disease-bearing insects and pests in response to rising temperatures. Agricultural land and our towns and cities will also suffer substantial damage from rising sea-levels, and increased flooding and violent storms, with huge costs for industry and ordinary people as their homes and livelihoods are destroyed. The scientists of the UN's Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change predict that millions of people worldwide will die and millions of others will become environmental refugees as a result. The effects of climate change are being felt even now. Global temperatures are rising at a rate faster than for 10,000 years, with the 12 hottest years in recorded history occurring since 1980. There has also been a sharp rise in extreme weather events, with a significant increase in the last 20 years in the frequency and intensity of hurricanes, tornadoes, large floods and heat-waves that have left a trail of devastation to infrastructure and agriculture in their wake.

The extent of climatic destabilisation is likely to be even more severe than previously thought if greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise unchecked. As warming increases, vital natural processes upon which we depend to absorb or contain three-quarters of our greenhouse gas emissions — such as the carbon dioxide-absorbing function of the world's forests and oceans — would weaken and even cease to operate. Instead of being net 'sinks', they will become net sources of greenhouse gases.

Hence, if emissions continue to rise unchecked, we risk releasing billions of tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere as rising temperatures trigger a huge die-back of trees, causing billions of acres of South American rainforest to turn into desert before 2050, the UK Met Office's Hadley Centre predicts. If this and other positive feedbacks occur — and they could well do so within the next few decades — we could find ourselves in a situation of catastrophic, runaway climatic destabilisation.

Yet the political and corporate response to this problem has been grossly inadequate. To stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations at non-catastrophic levels, the UN's Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change stated in 1990 that greenhouse gas emissions from human sources would have to be reduced immediately by at least 60 per cent below 1990 levels. At Kyoto, however, developed countries agreed to a cut of just 5.2 per cent, to be achieved between 2008 and 2012. Worse, the US Congress has refused to ratify the US' Kyoto commitment. Even if the Kyoto targets were met, given that developing countries are under no obligation to prevent their emissions from continuing to increase, global emissions would rise to 30 per cent above 1990 levels by 2010.

We deplore the lack of serious political action to address this issue and we deplore attempts by many large corporations to block meaningful change. For short-term gain, they seem willing to jeopardise the welfare, indeed survival, of a large part of humanity.

If catastrophic climate change is to be avoided, we call upon our governments to take the following action without delay:

* Accept the goal of reducing carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere to 1990 levels — around 350 parts per million by volume (ppmv), whilst never exceeding 400ppmv. A higher concentration (including that proposed by the EU of 550ppmv — almost twice the pre-industrial level) would involve straying into a danger zone of catastrophic climatic instability.

* To achieve this goal, a target of 30 years to have cut CO₂ emissions by 70-80 per cent below 1990 levels, and 50 years for a near total phase-out of fossil fuels should be adopted. This is the very minimum that the current crisis demands. While it may be challenging for many countries, it is the political will to implement policy options which is the biggest challenge, not the technological one.

* Implement nothing less than a crash programme to meet these targets. Measures should be put in place to significantly reduce energy use. Our remaining energy requirements should be met by a combination of existing renewable energy technologies — quite feasible if invested in sufficiently and produced on a large enough scale.

* Transfer all public subsidies and encourage the transfer of private investment away from supporting fossil fuels and cars towards supporting ecologically sustainable renewables and public transport. This applies in equal measure to loans and investments to developing countries from the industrialised world and the international financial institutions. It should be recognised that in developing countries, where dependence upon fossil fuels is less, it will be far easier to turn rapidly towards a renewable energy path. Everything should be done, therefore, to enable this.

* Change taxation systems to reflect the need to discourage the use of fossil fuels and cars.

* End the exploration and development of new oil, coal and gas reserves immediately.

* Set in place a far more effective, inclusive and hence equitable international political mechanism to curb the consumption of fossil fuels in all countries. The only realistic means proposed so far of achieving this is a formal global programme of “Contraction and Convergence”, as advocated by GLOBE International (the Global Legislators Organisation for a Balanced Environment) and by an increasing number of governments in Europe, Africa and the majority of Southern countries in the so-called Group of 77 and China.

* Recognise that the avoidance of serious climate change cannot succeed without the protection of the planet’s natural sinks.

* Hence, take immediate action to stop the continued destruction of the world’s remaining forests, particularly tropical rainforests — critical for the stability of global climate. At the international level, legally-binding forest protection must be negotiated, even if this requires the provision of compensation to those countries that possess the principal standing forests. In developed countries, consumption of wood and wood-derived paper will have to be reduced by two-thirds. Measures should also be put in place to ensure massive reforestation, while avoiding monoculture plantations of fast-growing exotics where possible.

* Take immediate action to eliminate all ozone-depleting chemicals — responsible for a hole in the ozone layer that in 1998 was larger than ever — and that are still

being produced despite the Montreal Protocol. Also, make the removal of CFCs from all appliances prior to disposal a legal requirement. Unless this is achieved, the phytoplankton in the oceans, upon which we depend to absorb carbon dioxide, will continue to be destroyed by increasing ultraviolet radiation.

* Transfer all public subsidies away from supporting industrial agriculture, which is largely responsible for the unrelenting destruction of our agricultural soils — another important sink for carbon dioxide — and for substantial emissions of carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane. Instead, a rapid transition to low-impact, ecologically-based organic farming for local consumption should be promoted.

* Reverse the current subordination of ecological and social imperatives to the short-term interests of corporations and investors and the maximisation of world trade. Large-scale global trade massively increases the distance goods are transported, resulting in more greenhouse gas emissions, whilst simultaneously exerting powerful deregulatory pressures that inhibit governments from raising environmental standards.

Hence, the provision of subsidies and the signing of treaties that increase this trend should cease. A change of direction towards the nurturing of a network of more self-sustaining, local economies and an end to undemocratic corporate influence on the political process is essential.

Whilst the changes that are required may seem great, we are not calling upon people to make huge sacrifices. All of the measures that we have outlined, essential to prevent dangerous climatic disruption, are needed whether or not our climate is in danger, as they will help solve many of the other major problems that confront us today, such as unemployment, ill health and threats to peace. Implementing these measures will ensure that —

* more jobs are created and income saved from the development of new renewable technologies and from the re-emergence of strong local economies;

* a vast improvement in our health takes place with clean air in our cities;

* greater world security is achieved as tensions over the control of oil in the Middle East and elsewhere are diminished;

* the planet's rainforests, the lungs of the world and home to 50-80 percent of animal and plant species, are saved from destruction;

* greater food security and better health are attained with ecologically sustainable methods of agriculture.

Whilst avoiding the worst impacts of climate change, our entire quality of life will also improve. The benefits of such action are clearly huge and the costs low when compared with the massive costs of inaction which climatic destabilisation would inevitably inflict.

It is for these reasons that we call upon our political and corporate leaders to face their responsibilities and take immediate action to protect our climate.

We urge members of the public and all non-governmental organisations to organise grass roots movements to exert pressure on our governments to ensure they achieve this goal.

Too much time has already been wasted and it is running out fast. We cannot wait until major climate catastrophes strike the developed world and wake us from our slumber — by then it will be too late. We need political action now. A crash programme is therefore an imperative. We have no alternative.

SIGNATORIES

A SEED Europe, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Carl Anthony — Urban Habitat Program, San Francisco, USA.

Homero Aridjis — Founder & President of 'Grupo de los Cien', Mexico. President of PEN International. Received the UNEP Global 500 Award in 1985.

Henk von Arkel — Director, STROHALM, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Dr. Tim Bayliss-Smith — Senior Lecturer of Geography, St. John's College, Cambridge, UK.

Maria Becket — Religion, Science & the Environment, London, UK.

Robert W. Benson — Professor of Law, Loyola Law School, Los Angeles, USA.

Professor David Bellamy — Botanist, author and broadcaster. Director, The Conservation Foundation, and Trustee, WWF. London UK,.

Father Thomas Berry — Cultural Historian, Theologian, Author of 'The Universe Story', USA.

Wendell Berry — Ecologist poet and novelist, Kentucky, USA.

Dr. Richard O. Bierregaard Junior — Biology Department, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, USA.

Brent Blackwelder — Director of Friends of the Earth, Washington D.C., USA.

Dr. Egbert Boeker — Professor of Environmental Physics, Vrye University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Professor Hartmut Bossel — Sustainable Systems Research, University of Kassel, Germany.

Dr. Richard A. Bradley — Associate Professor of EEO Biology, Ohio State University, Ohio, USA.

Christopher Le Breton — Executive Director, GLOBE-International, Brussels, Belgium.

Associate Professor Lars Broman — Director, Solar Energy Research Center, Dalarna University, Borlange, Sweden.

David R. Brower — Founder of Friends of the Earth & Earth Island Institute, USA.

Dr. David Brown — Forest Resources, Seattle, USA.

Beth Burrows — Director, The Edmonds Institute, Washington D.C., USA.

Francis Caas — Director, GLOBE — Southern Africa, Cape Town, South Africa.

Dr. Fritjof Capra — Elmwood Institute, Berkeley, USA, author of 'The Tao of Physics'.

Professor E. Carr Everbach — Chair, Environmental Studies, Swarthmore College, USA.

Moss Cass — Former Minister for the Environment in Australia.

Anthony Cortese, Sc.D. — President, Second Nature Inc., Boston, USA.

Sandra Coveny — Co-President, Society for Conservation, Corvallis, USA.

Britta Coy — Green City Germany, A SEED Europe.

Kevin Danaher — Director, Global Exchange, San Francisco, USA.

Dr. Ian Darton-Hill — Helen Keller International, New York, USA.

Dr. Joan S. Davis — President, ECOROPA, Zurich, Switzerland.

Ulf Doerner — Ingenieurbuero fuer Umwelttechnik, Muenchen, Germany.

Richard Douthwaite — Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability, Westport, Republic of Ireland.

Mark Dowie — Author of 'Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century'.

Mark Dubrulle — President, European Society for Environment & Development, Brussels, Belgium.

Seth Dunn — Worldwatch Institute, Washington D.C., USA.

Dr. David Ehrenfeld — Professor of Biology, Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA.

Dr. Joan Ehrenfeld — Professor of Ecology, Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA.

Dr. Richard W. England — Director of the Center for Business & Economic Research, University of New Hampshire, USA.

Paul R. Epstein — M.D., M.P.H., Associate Director, Center for Health and the Global Environment, Harvard Medical School, Boston, USA.

Dr. Heiner Feldhaus — Director, oeco-Capital Insurance, Munich, Germany.

Zsusanna Flachner — Institute of Environmental Management, Environmental Survey Office, Budapest, Hungary.

Dr. Tamas Fleischer — Senior Research Fellow, Institute of World Economics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences — Budapest, Hungary.

Professor Elisabet Fogelqvist — Analytical & Marine Chemistry, Goeteborg University, Sweden.

Uwe Fritsche — Energy Coordination, oko-Institut, Darmstadt, Germany.

Alain-Claude Galtié — Ecologist and writer, Paris, France.

Maneka Gandhi — Former Minister for the Environment, Current Minister of State for Social Justice & Empowerment, India.

Ross Gelbspan — Journalist, Pulitzer Prize winner, Author of 'The Heat is On'.

Susan George — President of l'Observatoire de la Mondialisation, Paris, France.

Herbert Girardet — Chairman, The Schumacher Society, London, UK.

Dr. Michael H. Glantz — Director, Environmental & Societal Impact Group, National Center for Atmospheric Research — Boulder, USA.

Robert Goodland — Washington D.C., USA.

Dr. Eban Goodstein — Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Lewis & Clark College, Portland, USA.

Andy Gouldson — Lecturer in Environmental Policy, Department of Geography & Environment, London School of Economics, London.

GREENPEACE International, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Eduardo Gudynas — Latin American Center for Social Ecology, Uruguay.

Bishop Thomas J. Gumleton — Bishop of Detroit, Michigan, Founder of 'Pax Christi'.

Professor Michael G. Hadfield — Director, Kewalo Marione Laboratory, Honolulu, USA.

Marie Haisova — Argentura Gaia, Praha, Czech Republic.

Jonathan Harris — Senior Research Associate, Global Development and Environment Institute — Tufts University, Medford, USA.

Hermann Hatzfeld — Arbeitsgemeinschaft Naturgemaesse Waldwirtschaft, FSC Arbeitsgruppe Deutschland, Germany.

Jan Haverkamp — Environmentalist, Czech Republic.

Randall Hayes — President, Rainforest Action Network, San Francisco, USA.

Dr. G.P. Hekstra — European Editor of Land Degradation & Development, Harich, the Netherlands.

Steve Hellinger — President, The Development GAP, Washington D.C., USA.

Max Henriques — Meteorologist, Director of Serial del Clima, Columbian Television, Bogota, Columbia.

Jim Hightower — Broadcaster, Austin, Texas, USA.

Dr. Mae-Wan Ho — Biology Department, Open University, Milton Keynes, UK.

Henk Hobbelink — Founder of GRAIN, Barcelona, Spain.

Oliver Hoedman — Corporate Europe Observatory, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Willem Hoogendiyk — Stichting Aarde, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Dr. Mikulas Huba — Society for Sustainable Living in the Slovak Republic, Bratislava, Slovakia.

Mohammed Idris — President, Third World Network & Consumer's Association of Penang, Penang, Malaysia.

Stephen Joseph — Executive Director, Transport 2000, London UK.

Tony Juniper — Policy & Campaigns Director, Friends of the Earth, London, UK.

Alexander Karpov — St. Petersburg Society for Naturalists, St. Petersburg, Russia.

James R. Karr — Professor of Fisheries & Zoology, Adjunct Professor of Civil Engineering, Environmental Health & Public Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle, USA.

Danny Kennedy — Director, Project Underground, Berkeley, USA.

Imran Khan — Founder of Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital, President of Pakistan's Tehruk Insaaf Party.

Martin Khor — Director, Third World Network and Penang's Consumer Association, Malaysia.

Andy Kimbrell — Executive Director, International Center for Technology Assessment, Washington DC, USA.

Professor Hermann Knoflacher — Institut fuer Verkehrs-planung & technik, Technische Universitaet, Vienna, Austria.

Dr. Florianne Koechlin — Biologist, Muenchenstein, Switzerland.

Christina Kopernik-Steckel — European Youth Forest Action, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Dr. David Korten — President, People-Centred Development Forum, New York, USA.

Professor Ronald Labonte — School of Health Sciences, Deakin University, Burwood, Australia.

Brice Lalonde — Former Minister for the Environment, France.

Dr. Ari Lampinen — Department of Biological & Environmental Sciences, University of Jyvaskyla, Finland.

Dr. Tim Lang — Professor of Food Policy, Thames Valley University, London UK.

Valerie Langer — Friends of the Clayoquot Sound, British Columbia, Canada.

David Legge — La Trobe University, Australia.

Dr. Jeremy Leggett — Director, The Solar Century, Richmond, UK.

Harry Lehmann — Chairman of Eurosolar, Head of Systems Analysis, Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Energy & Environment, Wuppertal, Germany.

Pierre Lehmann — Société d'Etude de l'Environnement, Vevey, Switzerland.

Stuart Leiderman — Environmental Refugees & Ecological Restoration, University of New Hampshire, Durham, USA.

Rabbi Michael Lerner — Editor, Tikkun Magazine, USA.

Dr. Vladimir F. Levchenko — Institute of Evolutionary Physiology & Biochemistry, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

Dr Ulrich E. Loening — Emeritus Director, Center for Human Ecology, Edinburgh, UK.

Dr. James Lovelock — FRS, Atmospheric Chemist, author of 'Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth' & 'Ages of Gaia'.

José Lutzenberger — former Minister for the Environment, President Fundacio Gaia, Brazil.

Josh Mailman — Founder of 'Ventures Social Network' Foundation.

Professor P. Mallezas — Department of Meteorology & Climatology, Aristotelian University, Thessaloniki, Greece.

Jerry Mander — President, International Forum on Globalisation, San Francisco, USA.

Ben Matthews — School of Environmental Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

Manfred Max-Neff — Vice-chancellor, Austral University of Chile.

Steven McFadden — Director, the Wisdom Conservancy, Greenville, USA.

Bill McKibben — Author 'The End of Nature' USA.

Dr. Andrew McLaughlin — Professor of Philosophy, Lehman College, Bronx, USA.

Freda Meissner-Blau — Founder of the Austrian Green Party, Former M.P.

- André Menache — President, Doctors and Lawyers for Responsible Medicine, London, UK
- Victor Menotti — Director of the Environmental Response, International Forum on Globalisation, San Francisco, USA.
- Professor Niels I. Meyer — Department of Physics, University of Denmark, Lyngby, Denmark.
- Dr. H.C. Moll — Center for Energy & Environmental Studies, IVEM, Groningen, The Netherlands.
- Hugh Montefiore — Former Bishop of Birmingham.
- David Morris — Director, Institute for Local Self-Reliance, Minneapolis, USA.
- Peter Morrison — Executive Director, Pacific Biodiversity Institute, Winthrop, USA.
- John Naar — Author of 'Living with Natural Energy: Design for a Limited Planet'.
- Helena Norberg-Hodge — Director, International Society for Ecology and Culture, Dartington, UK.
- Jorgen Nordgard — Department of Building & Energy, Technical University of Denmark, Lyngby, Denmark.
- Professor Eugene Odum — Crafoord Laureate, Institute of Ecology, University of Georgia, Georgia, USA.
- John Passacantando — President, Ozone Action, Washington DC, USA.
- Jakub Patocka — Director, Friends of the Earth, Praha, Czech Republic.
- Dennis Paulson — Director, Slater Museum of Natural History, University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, USA.
- Dr. John Peet — University of Canterbury, Department of Chemical & Process Engineering, Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Jean-Marie Pelt — Director, Institut Européen d'Ecologie, Metz, France.
- Ignacio Peon — Director, Pacto de Grupos Ecologistas, Mexico.
- Claire Peterson — Helen Keller International, New York, USA.
- Carlos Pimenta — Former Minister for the Environment, Member of the European Parliament for Portugal, President of GLOBE EU.
- Carl Pope — Executive Director, Sierra Club, San Francisco, USA.
- Yeroslav E. Popov — Chairman of Biocenter, St. Petersburg, Russia.
- Jeremy Rifkin — Author, President of the Foundation for Economic Trends, Washington DC, USA.
- Carlo Ripa di Meana — Former EU Commissioner for the Environment, Member of the European Parliament for Italy.
- Mark Ritchie — President, Institute for Agriculture & Trade Policy, Minneapolis, USA.
- Anita & Gordon Roddick — Founders, The Body Shop, Littlehampton, UK.
- Juan Carlos Rodriguez Murillo — Ecologistas en Acción, Madrid, Spain.
- Chris Rose — National Election Agent, Green Party for England & Wales, UK.
- Rys Roth — Atmosphere Alliance, Olympia, USA.
- Atila Roque — Brazilian Institute of Economic & Social Analysis, Brazil.
- Wolfgang Sachs — Senior Research Fellow, Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Energy & Environment, Wuppertal, Germany.
- Kirkpatrick Sale — Founder of the Green Party, New York, Author of 'Human Scale' & 'Conquest of Paradise', USA.
- Dr. Josef Michael Schopf — Institut fuer Verkehrs-planung & -technik, Technische Universitaet, Vienna, Austria.
- Diane Schumacher — President of the Schumacher Society, Dartington, UK.
- Professor David E. Selby — Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada.
- Stanley K. Sheinbaum — Publisher of 'New Perspectives Quarterly', USA.

Dr. Vandana Shiva — Director, Research Foundation for Science, Technology & Ecology, New Delhi, India. Author of 'The Violence of the Green Revolution'.

Dr. Mark Siegmund — Director, The International Journal of Humanities and Peace, USA.

Fiona Sinclair — SEAD (Scottish Education & Action for Development), Edinburgh, UK.

Anthony Smith — President, Magdalen College, Oxford, UK.

Atossa Soltani — Director, Amazon Watch, Malibu, USA.

Dr. David Suzuki — David Suzuki Foundation, Vancouver, Canada.

Paul Sykes — Chairman, Democracy Movement, UK.

Nikolai Tolstoy — Author, UK.

Doug Tompkins — President, Foundation for Deep Ecology, San Francisco, USA.

Dr. Haruki Tschia — President of the Research Institute for Systems Technology, Tokyo, Japan.

Etienne Vernet — Secretary, ECOROPA, France.

Stephen Viederman — Director, Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation, USA.

Santiago Vilanova — Associacio 'Una Sola Terra', Barcelona, Spain.

Philippe de Villiers — M.P., Leader of the Anti-Maastricht Movement in France.

Lukas Vischer — Professor Emeritus in Ecumenical Theology, University of Berne, Switzerland.

Professor Nikolaus M. Waser — Department of Biology, University of California, Riverside, USA.

Dr. Phil Webber — Chairman, Committee of Scientists for Global Responsibility, London, UK.

Jup Weber — Member of the European Parliament for Luxembourg.

Professor George Woodwell — Director of Woods Hole Research Center, Woods Hole, USA.

Tracy, Marchioness of Worcester — Director, International Society for Ecology & Culture, Badminton, UK.

Daphne Wysham — Co-ordinator, Sustainable Energy & Economy Network, Research Fellow, Institute for Policy Studies, Washington DC, USA.

Alexei Yablokov — Former Minister for the Environment, Director, Center for Russian Environment Policy, Moscow, Russia.

Dr. Shahid Zia — Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan.

ADDED MATERIAL

To sign the declaration please send your name, title and position to: The Ecologist's Declaration on Climate Change, 46 The Vineyard, Richmond, Surrey, TW10 6AN, UK. Fax: (+44) (0)181 948 6787. Email: egoldsmith@ecologist.demon.co.uk