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HOW TO LOSE AN EARTH IN 10 YEARS

The New York Times and the super-wicked problem of climate change

By [Shannon Osaka](#) on Aug 2, 2018

This weekend, the New York Times' print subscribers will get something kind of crazy in the mail: A 66-page magazine with only a single article — and it's on climate change. The long-form piece, written by Nathaniel Rich and titled "Losing Earth," [is online now](#) and makes for fascinating, if sometimes depressing, reading. Between 1979 and 1989, Rich writes, humanity *almost* solved the problem of global warming.

The piece follows [climate scientist James Hansen](#) and environmental lobbyist Rafe Pomerance as they try to get pretty much anyone — politicians, the media, energy companies — to engage and act on the issue of climate change. But while they managed to move global warming onto the public stage, the opportunity for binding international action came and went with the 1989 U.N. climate

conference in the Netherlands. The U.S. delegation, led by a recalcitrant Reagan appointee, balked when faced with an actual agreement.

"Why didn't we act?" Rich asks, almost plaintively, in his prologue. He argues that the primary barriers to inaction today — widespread climate denial and propagandizing by far-right groups and fossil fuel companies — had not emerged by the mid-1980s. "Almost nothing stood in our way — except ourselves," he writes.

Rich has already come under fire for this perspective. Many writers have complained that he is letting fossil fuel companies and Republicans [off the hook](#). But is it true? Is human nature *itself* to blame for inaction?

A fair number of scholars agree — to a point. For a long time, climate change has been called a “wicked problem” or even a “[super-wicked problem](#)” by behavioral economists and policy experts. As political scientist Steve Rayner has written, [climate change has no simple solution, no silver bullet](#). It is scientifically complex and comes with [deep uncertainties](#) about the future. It cuts across boundaries, both disciplinary and national. Its worst effects will occur in the future, not in the here and now. And it requires large-scale, systemic changes to society.

Unfortunately, humans suck at dealing with wicked problems, like poverty and nuclear weapons. Economist Richard Thaler’s work shows that we are only rational some of the time; and, when we are rational, we’re also pretty selfish. We think about ourselves more than others, and [we think about the present more than future generations](#). “We worry about the future,” Rich writes. “But how much, exactly? The answer, as any economist could tell you, is very little.”

This idea — that the long timescale of climate change has made it difficult for us to act on it — is the theoretical underpinning of “Losing Earth.” It’s no one’s fault that we didn’t act in the 1980s. But at the same time it’s *everyone’s* fault.

Rich isn’t wrong that the timescale makes a difference, and that humans struggle with an issue as global and complex as climate change. But his sweeping vision of human nature at times takes on a tinge of inevitability. It reminds me, in a way, of Garrett Hardin’s 1968 “[Tragedy of the Commons](#)” — another dark theory on collective irrationality. Hardin argued that, as a species, we would always tend towards overuse of shared resources and overpopulation. His thesis was hugely influential, and continues to be a staple in environmental research.

The thing is: Hardin was wrong. Forty years after his paper debuted in *Science*, economist Elinor Ostrom won a Nobel Prize for showing that

communities around the world [do successfully manage and share resources](#) — even over many generations. They do it through cooperation, communication, and small-scale local institutions. She was famous for showing that environmental problems can be solved from the bottom-up.

And that’s what Rich misses, in his otherwise fascinating and in-depth piece for the *Times*. It’s hard to say what would have happened if the United States had signed the 1989 agreement. As Robinson Meyer [notes in the Atlantic](#): “There are too many counterfactuals to consider.”

But climate change, as a super-wicked problem lasting generations, could never have been “solved” in one fell swoop. The decade of climate action that Rich traces is only a small window into a fairly high level of decision-making: climate policy at the federal level. And, according to experts like Rayner, [wicked problems need to also be addressed at the levels of states, cities, and provinces](#) — not just by governments and nation-states.

The good news: That’s already happening. States, municipalities, neighborhoods, and community groups are already working to address climate change to the best of their ability. Many [have redoubled their efforts in the Trump era](#). In 2006, Rayner predicted that states would file lawsuits against the federal government — 12 years later, climate lawsuits are common, and are [even brought by children](#).

So did we really “lose Earth” in 1989? Of course not. But it is a sobering reminder of how much work we have left. “Human nature has brought us to this place,” Rich writes. “Perhaps human nature will one day bring us through.”