



World Scientists Call for Global System Change to Address Climate Emergency



Thousands take part in the "People's Climate March" in Amsterdam on April 29, 2017, to call for an ambitious climate policy. Romy Arroyo Fernandez / NurPhoto via Getty Images

By [Curtis Johnson](#), [Truthout](#) Published November 12, 2019

Moved by a moral obligation to “tell it like it is,” more than 11,000 scientists from 153 countries have released a statement warning humanity of the “catastrophic threat” we face as the climate emergency continues apace. Without transformative changes to save the biosphere, they warn, there will be “untold suffering due to the climate crisis.” Since the statement was published on November 5, thousands more scientists have signed on to it.

The [statement in the online journal *BioScience*](#) pointed out that, despite 40 years of global climate negotiations, the world has “generally conducted business as usual and largely failed to address this predicament,” with only minor exceptions. As a result, they say, global temperatures have reached crisis levels and climate disruption is accelerating faster than most scientists expected, now “threatening natural ecosystems and the fate of humanity.” The danger includes potential climate tipping

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points that could lead to a “hothouse Earth” beyond any ability for humanity to control and that could even make “large areas of the Earth uninhabitable” according to the warning.

The fix that’s needed is not simply one of everybody doing their own small part, personally, to solve the problem. In the statement’s conclusion, scientists say that “mitigating and adapting to climate change while honoring the diversity of humans entails major transformations in the ways our global society functions and interacts with natural ecosystems.” The scientists call on those in power and all of humanity to respond to the emergency warning and act to “sustain life on planet Earth, our only home.”

The statement vividly brings to life the key trends of changing climate through a suite of “graphical vital signs” of human activity over the last 40 years. The basic scientific data of these changes is presented simply and with great clarity: a 5 percent rise every 10 years in carbon emissions; a 3.65 percent rise of another powerful greenhouse gas, methane, every 10 years; a global surface temperature rise of .183 degrees Celsius every 10 years; a decline of Arctic sea ice at a rate of 11.7 percent every 10 years; significant drops in the ice mass of Greenland, Antarctica and world glaciers; an increase in ocean acidity and temperatures; an increase of 44 percent in the amount of area burned by wildfires in the U.S. every 10 years; and an 88 percent rise in extreme weather events per 10 years.

The scientists make clear that wealthy, Western countries are primarily responsible for the build-up of these greenhouse gases, and also, in general, have the highest per capita emissions. They link these trends to a number of factors, including an increase in world gross domestic product (GDP) and total institutional assets, a rise in ruminant livestock and meat production, a rise in human population, an increase in tree cover loss, and air transport.

There are certain positive trends, such as a decrease in fossil fuel subsidies and the global total fertility rate, as well as in the rate over the past two decades of Brazilian Amazonian forest loss, for instance. Still, the scientists also point out that even some of these positive trends are beginning to reverse or flatten out. One concrete positive they point to, however, is the surge of concern about the climate crisis, including youth climate strikes around the world.

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The illustration of reality portrayed in the statement deserves thorough examination by all people who care about life on the planet and who are trying to figure out why this planetary death spiral continues, despite all the decades of warnings and the growing awareness of the problem.

But it’s still not too late to save large portions of planetary life, they say. The scientists outline steps in six critical areas that human society could take to significantly address the danger:

- Fossil fuel stocks must be left in the ground, and the world must quickly “implement massive energy efficiency and conservation practices” while replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy sources.
- Short-lived climate pollutants like methane need to be promptly reduced.
- Humanity must move to protect and restore Earth’s ecosystems — coral reefs, forests, savannas, wetlands, soils and marine habitats — to stop habitat and biodiversity loss. Forested lands must be enhanced at enormous scales.
- Plant-based foods need to increasingly replace such a massive consumption of meat.



- Economic extraction of materials and exploitation of ecosystems driven by economic growth need to be quickly curtailed and replaced by maintenance of long-term sustainability of the biosphere.
- Population must be stabilized, and ideally, reduced by making family-planning services available to all people and achieving full gender equality.

“Our goals need to shift from GDP growth and the pursuit of affluence toward sustaining ecosystems and improving human well-being by prioritizing basic needs and reducing inequality” the statement reads.

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These steps are profoundly rational and achievable. They provide a basic road map humanity could follow to save our planet, transforming major aspects of how we relate to nature.

Of course, the problem is that those in power remain deeply entrenched in running a system that is doing the opposite. Capitalism, as a system, precludes the possibility of prioritizing calculations and decisions on such rational and well-founded arguments about what’s needed to sustain planetary life, and instead is continually driven by what is most profitable and beneficial to the economic/political interests of the world’s ruling classes.

In some of these countries are the [Trumps](#) and [Bolsonaros](#) of the world who are actively accelerating the climate and extinction crisis by expanding fossil fuel extraction, wiping out regulations and protections for humans and other species, and mowing down rainforests. In the countries of “enlightened” capitalists, leaders pay lip service to the problem, but are [prevented](#)

[by the workings of the systems](#) they head to [do what’s necessary](#) to deal with the crisis, and so continue with “business as usual.”

All this continues despite the clear, repeated warnings pointing to a global [extermination of species](#), increasingly powerful storms (especially devastating the poorest on the planet), and the specter of complete climate catastrophe.

The question for all of us, for humanity as a whole, is: Will we rise to wrest control from the hands of a system that is destroying planetary life? Will we transform human social relations, or succumb to the inexorable death spiral capitalism has wrought?