

# **Humanity, a Catalyst of Environmental Change and Disaster**

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Who can say that climate change and global warming are not real? The evidence is all around us. Species are becoming extinct at an unprecedented rate, sea levels are on the rise, glaciers are melting all around us, Arctic and Antarctic ice shelves are falling into the ocean, and global temperatures are constantly increasing. There are some, however, who argue that this is simply a natural process. They say the environment is in a constant state of change, and that environmental change existed long before humans ever have. I would like to state that I do acknowledge both of those facts for facts they are. After all if they were false it would mean that before the first humans existed the planet never changed. How then would one explain the dinosaurs and the creation of the continents? I am also not discounting the links they expound between global warming and a natural terrestrial cycle. There is admittedly strong evidence suggesting such connections.

Although I do firmly believe all this to be true I also believe that humans are a major contributor to climate and other environmental change on both local and global scales. The human race is a reckless species that seems to hold no respect for the environment and is a catalyst for disaster. Where other species adapt to their environment, we force the environment to adapt to us. We over-fish, hunt to excess, and single-handedly cause entire species to reach extinction. Worst of all, however, is not what or how much we take from this poor planet from which we come, but what we give back to it: garbage, litter, pollution, toxic waste. Everything we do not want, we simply leave for Mother Nature to deal with. Humanity seems to think that it is immune to the changes it forces on the world.

The human race does so much to the environment without thinking of the consequences to itself. Is there a region of the earth that has not been settled, tamed or at the least explored by human-kind? No, we colonize everything in sight without thought about how we might be affecting the region, and how it might in turn affect us. We have explored everything from the bottom of the oceans to the Antarctic, and everywhere we go, we mutilate what we encounter. It does not take long, once we have entered a forest, to begin logging and stripping the forest bare. John Vaillant, author of The Golden Spruce puts this nicely into perspective for us: “Collectively [Washington, Oregon, and northern California], have lost 90 percent of their old growth coastal forest, while British Columbia, which originally had twice as much forest area, has lost 60 percent”(221). It is important to note here that it has only been 140 years since Europeans set foot on North America’s west coast. If a landscape is not fit for human consumption, we modify it to make it so. If a region is particularly mountainous, we will go to great efforts to reshape the hills into a series of terraces that can be farmed and lived upon.\* Wherever we go we literally reconstruct nature as we see fit. And the local climate is forced to respond. When we destroy a forest, all of its inhabitants are forced to adapt, move out, or be destroyed. As most biological species cannot evolve at the ridiculously rapid rate at which we destroy their habitats, it is the latter options that are most often realized. As humans eat up the environment which we inhabit, we inexorably alter everything with which we come in contact. This can do nothing but eventually affect the human race as well.

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\* This is a phenomenon often seen in the hills in cultures all over the world. It has been seen in old Incan ruins in South America and is still used in mountainous countries like India.

Once we have moved into a region and reformatted the local ecosystem to our whims, we immediately go about slaughtering creatures by the thousands. If a bear was to start systematically killing off all other species in the forest it would be the same. But a bear does not do it even though he could. That is because he cannot survive without those other species. Neither can humans, but we do it anyway. You need look no further than the Canadian Maritimes to see this disturbing trend. It was not long after the Basque had first established themselves on the North American coast near the turn of the last millennium that the whaling industry was already in decline. But that did not stop us. We simply moved on to exploit different species. From whales, we moved on to cod, but now even that is almost gone. Where to next?

The story of the dodo bird is another well known example. Before humans arrived in the Mauritius Islands, these small birds were everywhere and had no natural enemy. When ships arrived, they brought with them many dangers to the sloth-like land birds, such as cats and dogs. In a span of approximately 150 years, these creatures succumbed to the constant pressure of new found enemies and became extinct. The rate at which humans cause other species to disappear is alarming, and more than slightly frightening.

Few people think about how these innumerable extinctions we cause will affect the world in which we live. How long will it be before there are so few creatures left that it becomes impossible to create a sustainable food chain? Even fewer people are truly willing to do something about it. Will it take the complete collapse of the world's ecosystems to show us what we are doing? And at that point it will be far too late. Although a lot of people do not seem realize this, we depend on those same ecosystems we are destroying one species at a time. It is not biologically possible for an isolated species to survive and as such we need the planet's diversity.

Just as we need the planet's diversity, so too do we need the planet to be clean. The planet cannot be responsible for the junk we leave it to deal with. This includes not only the obvious garbage and pollution we do a terrible job of disposing, but the less obvious waste as well. Everything we leave somewhere eventually gets returned to nature as a natural hazard. Rusty farm equipment, abandoned buildings and anything we drop outdoors, whether accidental or purposeful are all damaging as well. Loose plastic bags, for instance, become choking hazards to all kinds of animals. Rusty old equipment of any kind is dangerous to animals for multiple reasons. It can of course give them nasty external wounds but it can also cause them severe pain and even death from poisoning if an animal happens to lick it. Anything with any kinds of chemicals or abnormal mineral levels in it is potentially very dangerous to plant life and any aqueous ecosystems as these toxins will affect the natural balance in the chemicals of the soil or water in question. It is abhorrent how poor humans are at monitoring what we put into our natural environment. Every time someone leaves something on the ground when out of doors, they are contributing to climate change. With the amount of waste introduced into the environment each year, humans play a huge factor in the earth's rapidly changing climate.

Yes, climate change is a naturally occurring phenomenon. But not at the rate at which it is happening now. There is far too much evidence pointing towards the devastating effects of humans on the environment to say we are not a huge factor in the current rapid rate of climate change. The way we seem to destroy and reform whole ecosystems to our will, the careless way in which we slaughter other species in large

numbers, and the practically ignorant way in which we dispose of so much of our needless waste all pointlessly accelerate the rate at which our current climate is degenerating. Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki sums up what humans are doing to poor planet Earth quite nicely when he says: “We are playing Russian roulette with features of the planet's atmosphere that will profoundly impact generations to come. How long are we willing to gamble?” But our chances are now so low we can no longer afford to gamble. If the climate keeps changing at such a lightning quick pace, a pace that no living creature can keep up with, it will not be long before another mass extinction. It would likely be the end of the era of the mammals. And humans are mammals.

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