

IS THERE ENOUGH TIME?

Lester R. Brown

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Can we do what needs to be done fast enough? We know that social change often takes time. In Eastern Europe, it was fully four decades from the imposition of socialism until its demise. Thirty-four years passed between the first U.S. Surgeon General's report on smoking and health and the landmark agreement between the tobacco industry and state governments. Thirty-eight years have passed since biologist Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, the wakeup call that gave rise to the modern environmental movement.

Sometimes things move much faster, especially when the magnitude of the threat is understood and the nature of the response is obvious, such as the U.S. response to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Within one year, the U.S. economy had largely been restructured. In less than four years, the war was over.

Accelerating the transition to a sustainable future means overcoming the inertia of both individuals and institutions. In some ways, inertia is our worst enemy. As individuals we often resist change. When we are grouped into large organizations, we resist it even more.

At the institutional level, we are looking for massive changes in industry, especially in energy. We are looking for changes in the material economy, shifting from a throwaway mentality to a closed loop/recycle mindset. If future food needs are to be satisfied adequately, we need a worldwide effort to reforest the land, conserve soil, and raise water productivity. Stabilizing population means quite literally a revolution in human reproductive behaviour, one that recognizes that a sustainable future is possible only if we average two children per couple. This is not a debatable point. It is a mathematical reality.

The big remaining challenge is on the educational front: how can we help literally billions of people in the world understand not only the need for change, but how that change can bring a life far better than they have today?

I am frequently asked if it is too late. My response is, Too late for what? Is it too late to save the Aral Sea? Yes, the Aral Sea is dead. Its fish have died; its fisheries have collapsed. Is it too late to save the glaciers in Glacier National Park in the United States? Most likely. They are already half gone and it would be virtually impossible now to reverse the rise in temperature in time to save them. Is it too late to avoid a rise in temperature from the buildup in greenhouse gases? Yes. A greenhouse gas-induced rise in temperature is apparently already under way. But is it too late to avoid runaway climate change? Perhaps not, if we quickly restructure the energy economy.

For many specifics, the answer is, Yes, it is too late. But there is a broader, more fundamental question: Is it too late to reverse the trends that will eventually lead to economic decline? Here I think the answer is no, not if we move quickly.

Perhaps the biggest single challenge we face is shifting from a carbon-based to a hydrogen-based energy economy, basically moving from fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy, such as solar, wind, and geothermal. How fast can we make this change? Can it be done before we trigger irreversible damage, such as a disastrous rise in sea level? We know from the U.S. response to the attack on Pearl Harbor that economic restructuring can occur at an incredible pace if a society is convinced of the need for it.

We study the archaeological sites of civilizations that moved onto economic paths that were environmentally destructive and could not make the needed course corrections in time. We face the same risk.

There is no middle path. Do we join together to build an economy that is sustainable? Or do we stay with our environmentally unsustainable economy until it declines? It is not a goal that can be compromised. One way or another, the choice will be made by our generation. But it will affect life on earth for all generations to come.

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- The knowledge base and fact sheets all show that the environment is changing for the worse and resources are insufficient to sustain the burgeoning human population.*
- Inertia at both the institutional and individual level needs to be removed in order to accelerate our transition to a 'sustainable' future.*
- We are late to take actions at the already declined frontiers of nature, such as dead Aral Sea, the declining fisheries and the inevitable rise in the temperatures of the earth due to the excessive accumulation of the greenhouse gases.*
- The biggest challenge towards the transition to a sustainable economy lies on the educational front as to how to make billions of people around the world understand that a 'change' is needed to bring forward a better life to live for.*
- But, we are not too late to still reverse the trends of our economic patterns of consumptions. We can still catch the bus by reconstructing our energy economy in a major way by the switch over to a hydrogen - based economy from the carbon - based fossil economy.*
- To sum up: the only thing constant is change; and it is in our hands to decide if the change will be mutually sustainable for man and the environment or at adverse cost to both.*