

Keswick Reminder 23.05.2025: NfWW No.87 The climate change conundrum

Have you wondered why climate change is such a 'wicked problem', one seemingly incapable of resolution, in spite of our best efforts? Consider this: at the same time that renewables are increasing by leaps and bounds so too is the global consumption of fossil fuels, and with that the inexorable rise in world temperature. At 1.55°C above pre-industrial levels, last year was the hottest on record, breaching the 2015 Paris Agreement of 1.5°C.

So why can't we respond with the urgency needed? There are many reasons. Here I want to focus on one: our economic system which is predicated on endless growth (the subject of an earlier piece from us.)

But what is wrong with growth? Surely growth means progress. Yes, but the trouble with endless growth is that it requires endless demand to satisfy insatiable consumption. And to satisfy that demand requires energy, at least 80% of which still comes from fossil fuels. Globally we have simply not decoupled growth from fossil fuel usage, and the fossil fuel companies and petrostates do not want us to, either.

The system also requires shareholder expectations of continual profit increases. And profit-driven decision-making creates incentives which are misaligned to planetary needs. Short-term financial returns almost always trump long-term environmental concerns.

But not only does the system not value nature as nature, we regard nature as there for the taking. Thus, we fell virgin forests, drill the seabed for oil and pollute the atmosphere – all for free. So-called externalities are still not properly priced into products in spite some attempts by governments.

Driving all this is our consumer culture: wanting, if not needing, more things and more experiences, as the system requires of us. And within this culture, what we buy – our consumption patterns – help to define who we are and to enhance our sense of self-worth. Indeed, personal identities and social status are bound up with 'lifestyle' consumption. All of which is fed by marketing that not only creates artificial needs but also encourages regular product replacement – think of fast fashion.

We inhabit two worlds at once: the web of capitalist modernity nested within the web of life and how we are living in the one is trashing the other. In short, we are fouling the nest. We like to think that 'green growth' is the way forward, but any growth – green or otherwise – is still growth.

GDP, the very metric used to define economic success (which we conflate with progress), is incompatible with the dramatic emissions reductions essential to address climate change. It also conflicts with the planet's most urgent needs – which are also our life needs – for conservation and protection.

Transitioning away from this model of growth, consumption and profit requires reimagining fundamental aspects of how we organise society, which is why it is such a wicked problem.

To join our local transitioning efforts, write to sustainablekeswick@gmail.com

Joe Human

Sustainable Keswick