

The Earth Will Be Here. Will We?

The Uninhabitable Earth

In 2017, *New York Magazine* published an article of extraordinary importance. Written by David Wallace-Wells, it was titled “The Uninhabitable Earth.”¹ In his article, Wallace-Wells describes the consequences of the catastrophic climate change toward which our planet is now moving.

The article occasioned serious controversy. Many criticize Wallace-Wells as pessimistic and scary. They are right – the story is pessimistic and scary. Nevertheless, it may be wise to be frightened of the future that seems to be coming our way. Many of us do not seem concerned enough, particularly not governments and those who lead them.

Current climate trends require effective action. Genuinely effective action will require changes and sacrifices that many wish to avoid. Many of the world’s largest and wealthiest nations have signed the Paris Agreement.² Despite this, they are not taking the action required to limit the worst effects of climate change. Some nations even reject the idea that human beings cause climate change, and they reject the idea that we can do anything to limit climate change. This is the policy of the current government of the United States. Instead, many of America’s leaders question the science that warns us of the dangers we face.

Because of these questions, Wallace-Wells wrote an annotated edition of the article³ to explain and substantiate the scientific aspects of controversial issues.

Two qualities of that article are particularly important.

First, Wallace-Wells digs into the systemic consequences of likely events. Most articles on the global threat of climate change focus on the rise in sea level without linking this rise to other issues. Nevertheless, the systemic follow-on effects that will come from rising seas will affect the world in areas far removed from the world’s coastlines.

One recent event offers a preview of the adverse effects that will follow a modest and predictable rise in sea level. The world’s nations barely managed to cope with four million refugees from civil war in Syria. A rise in temperature within the limits set by the Paris accords means a likely rise in sea level that will displace hundreds of millions of people.

Second, Wallace-Wells offers a systemic overview of effects at different levels of climate change. He addresses food security, agricultural growth zones, feedback loops from trapped methane in the tundra belt, and more. Climate change is already visible in rising health problems, increasing disease, and the shift of diseases to new territory.

As a youngster, I lived in New London, Connecticut. When I was young, it was

1 David Wallace-Wells, “The Uninhabitable Earth: Famine, Economic Collapse, a Sun that Cooks Us: What Climate Change Could Wreak—Sooner than You Think,” *New York Magazine*, July 9, 2017, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html>.

2 See <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>.

3 David Wallace-Wells, “The Uninhabitable Earth, Annotated Edition: The Facts, Research, and Science behind the Climate-Change Article that Explored Our Planet’s Worst-Case Scenarios,” *New York Magazine*, July 14, 2017, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans-annotated.html>.

4 Aneri Pattani, "It's High Time for Ticks, Which Are Spreading Diseases Farther," *The New York Times*, July 24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/24/health/ticks-disease-united-states.html>.

5 Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers, and William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972), available at <http://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Limits-to-Growth-digital-scan-version.pdf>.

6 Jo Confino, "It Is Profitable to Let the World Go to Hell," *The Guardian*, January 19, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/jan/19/davos-climate-action-democracy-failure-jorgen-randers>.

7 Jørgen Randers, "Demokratien har svært att hantera klimathotet," *Extrakt*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.extrakt.se/debatt-opinion/demokratien-oformogen-att-hantera-klimathotet/>.

8 Ibid.

safe to walk and play in the forest. Today, major precautions are necessary. For example, an article in the *New York Times* examined the spread of dangerous tick-borne diseases to New England.⁴ In addition to the problem of Lyme disease that has spread in recent decades, there are new, recently identified pathogens such as Bourbon virus and Powassen virus. These can cause permanent brain damage or death. As a child who lived twenty kilometers from the town of Lyme, none of these diseases made walking and camping in the forest a problem. Today, as shifting climate zones increase the range of ticks, it is sometimes dangerous to walk on suburban lawns.

In "The Uninhabitable Earth," Wallace-Wells describes the likely consequences of different scenarios as the planet shifts from one temperature level to the next. He covers moderate bad cases and immoderate worst cases. In my view, he makes a case for more action than the Paris accords require.

The careful analysis in the article permits informed choices. If human beings understand what's coming and still refuse to act, at least we have a chance to understand the price of inaction.

A few years back, Jørgen Randers – one of the co-authors of the 1972 Club of Rome Report⁵ – chaired a commission for the Norwegian parliament on ways to mitigate climate change. The commission produced an actionable, fifteen-point plan to help reduce Norway's contribution to the climate problem in meaningful ways. Since the plan required each Norwegian to pay \$250 or so in extra taxes for a generation, the government put this to a public vote. The plan was defeated.

In *The Guardian*, Jo Confino wrote, "If the [Randers Commission] plan had been given the green light, it would have allowed the country to cut its greenhouse gas emissions by two-thirds by 2050 and provide a case study other rich countries could learn from."⁶

Confino quotes a Swedish article in which Randers himself describes the problem: "It is cost-effective to postpone global climate action. It is profitable to let the world go to hell. I believe that the tyranny of the short term will prevail over the decades to come. As a result, a number of long-term problems will not be solved, even if they could have been, and even as they cause gradually increasing difficulties for all voters."⁷

Randers continued, "In my mind, the cost was ridiculously low, equivalent to an increase in income taxes from 36 to 37 percent, given that this plan would eliminate the most serious threat to the rich world in this century. In spite of this, a vast majority of Norwegians were against this sacrifice. To be frank, most voters preferred to use the money for other causes – like yet another weekend trip to London or Sweden for shopping."⁸

If one of the world's wealthiest and most environmentally concerned nations rejects a program such as this at a modest raise in taxes, there is little hope for the rest of the world. While Norway cannot change the world alone, an initiative such as this might have prompted similar action in the other Nordic nations. If the Nordic nations were to act, perhaps they could set an example for the rest of the European Union. If all Europe were to act ... and so on.

There is no way to know what the future will finally bring because we don't know where the rise in global temperature will stop. What makes David Wallace-Wells's article valuable is that it demonstrates the many serious consequences of catastrophic climate change. Rising oceans are only one of many challenges we face.

The Stockholm Resilience Group developed a model of nine planetary boundaries that describe the limits we face in the planetary environment. By 2015, the planet had crossed the boundaries on four planetary systems: climate change, loss of biosphere integrity, land-system change, and altered biogeochemical cycles (phosphorus and nitrogen). Two of these systems – climate change and biosphere

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