How to stop climate change: six ways to make the world a better place

May 1 2019, by Rick Stafford

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Nobel Peace Prize nominee Greta Thunberg claims we need system change to save the planet, and the majority of experts, from the IPCC, through to our own research, would certainly agree with this.

But for most people, it often isn't clear what changes actually need to be

made to address environmental problems. And ideas that are presented can be seem as extreme to some. This is despite the fact that many experts agree that to really tackle climate change, the focus needs to be on changing the capitalist system to make it more environment-friendly.

System change can sound scary, but as the current system drives social injustice and environmental destruction, a new approach to address both is called for. These are some suggestions to help build that new system which also aim to improve people's lives in the process.

1. Less focus on economic growth

The suggestion that GDP is a good measure of a country's progress has been frequently challenged. To achieve growth, we consume more products, these products need raw materials and energy to produce – and often result in excessive waste when they are disposed of. Hence pursuit of economic growth drives a wasteful use of scarce resources.

Achieving growth isn't necessarily bad – but focusing solely on growth is. it prevents many other important strategies being put in place, even if they are actually beneficial for the majority of society. As economist Kate Raworth states, we need to be "agnostic about economic growth" and embrace other measures of societal well-being, such as the Human Development Index and Genuine Progress Indicator, which combine financial gains with non-market benefits – such as human health and reduced environmental degradation.

2. Higher taxes and subsidised transport

Incremental increases in tax (for example on fuel), without alternatives, do little to change behaviour. Instead, it just increases the financial burden on the less well-off – this being one factor behind the recent

"yellow vests" (gilets jaunes) protests in France. To achieve rapid and fair changes in consumer behaviour, there needs to be [large tax increases on the most environmentally damaging products](#) to turn them from everyday items into luxury goods. This would include air travel, fossil fuels and red meat.

We also need to ensure environmentally sound alternatives are available and heavily subsidised. This would see subsidised and reliable public transport, car share schemes to allow occasional use of cars, bike hire, and subsidies on fresh vegetables and meat alternatives – all of which would help people easily transition to a more (environmentally) healthy lifestyle.

3. Work less

From an environmental perspective, working less – whether a four-day week, or working only a proportion of the year – has [many benefits](#). Less commuting to work, more time to cook healthy food and more time to take holidays, without the need for flying. The reduction in household income also means less opportunity for over-consumption of "luxury" goods that drive economic growth without adding much value to society.
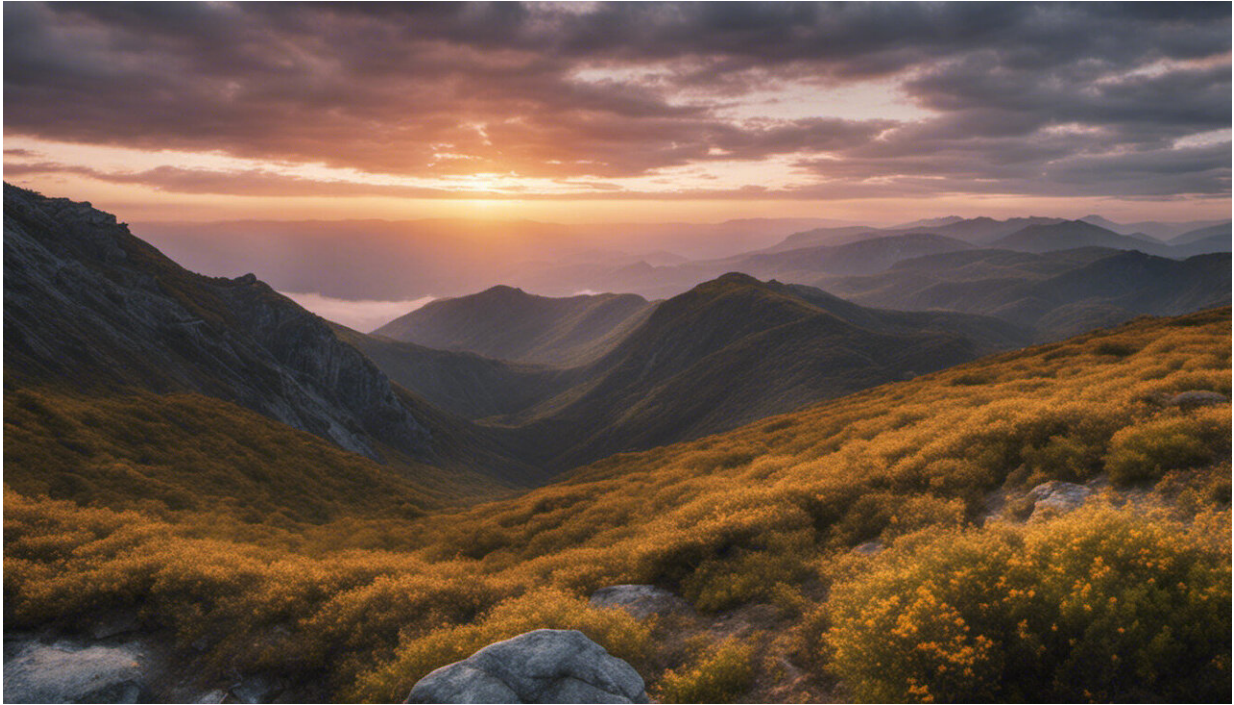
Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Plans for a [four-day work week](#) and a [universal basic income](#) would also help to create greater levels of meaningful employment, safeguard people's mental health and reduce societal inequality – as well as providing more leisure and family time.

4. Think locally

Few people can really identify with the scale of deforestation in Asia for palm oil, or in the Amazon for cattle farms. This is why, to really tackle climate change, we need to think locally and understand the impact of our behaviours on our communities. [Farming](#), [energy production](#) and [waste disposal](#) are obvious examples.

Localised processes can also be more environmentally sound. Recent research on [small-scale coastal fisheries](#) across the globe suggests that if we rely on these for fish – rather than large-scale industrial fishing – we can dramatically increase fish stocks, increase food security in developing countries and improve the local economies of fishing towns in countries such as the UK.

5. Learn about nature and look after it

There is a [disconnect from the natural world](#), exemplified even in academic and policy circles with the monetisation of nature through "ecosystem services" and how they contribute to human well-being – by providing food, water, wood and medicines, for example. All of which, puts a price on nature – by defining the Earth's resources as "natural capital".

We need to appreciate nature for what it is – and protect it now. [Teaching natural history in schools](#) is a good place to start. [Protecting, restoring and rewilding ecosystems](#) on a large scale will also enhance biodiversity, store carbon and reduce pollution – three of the major environmental [planetary boundaries](#) – or safe environmental limits – we have greatly exceeded.

6. Don't just rely on technology

[Technological advances](#) such as renewable energy, [electric vehicles](#) and smart cities are important steps to reduce our carbon emissions. But they are not the only "solution" to climate change.

Manufacturing [lithium ion batteries](#), solar panels and turbines has an environmental cost, too. And, in the same way, changing your car to an electric vehicle is likely to have a [bigger short-term carbon footprint](#)

than running your current car. This is why [technological advances](link) must be used in conjunction with lifestyle changes if we want to transform our society in an environmentally and socially just manner.

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list, but serves as a starting place to show how environmental issues can be addressed and at the same time we can create a fairer and more just society. A society with more free time, more interaction with our local communities and better physical and mental well-being. The future is only scary if we continue on our current path.

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