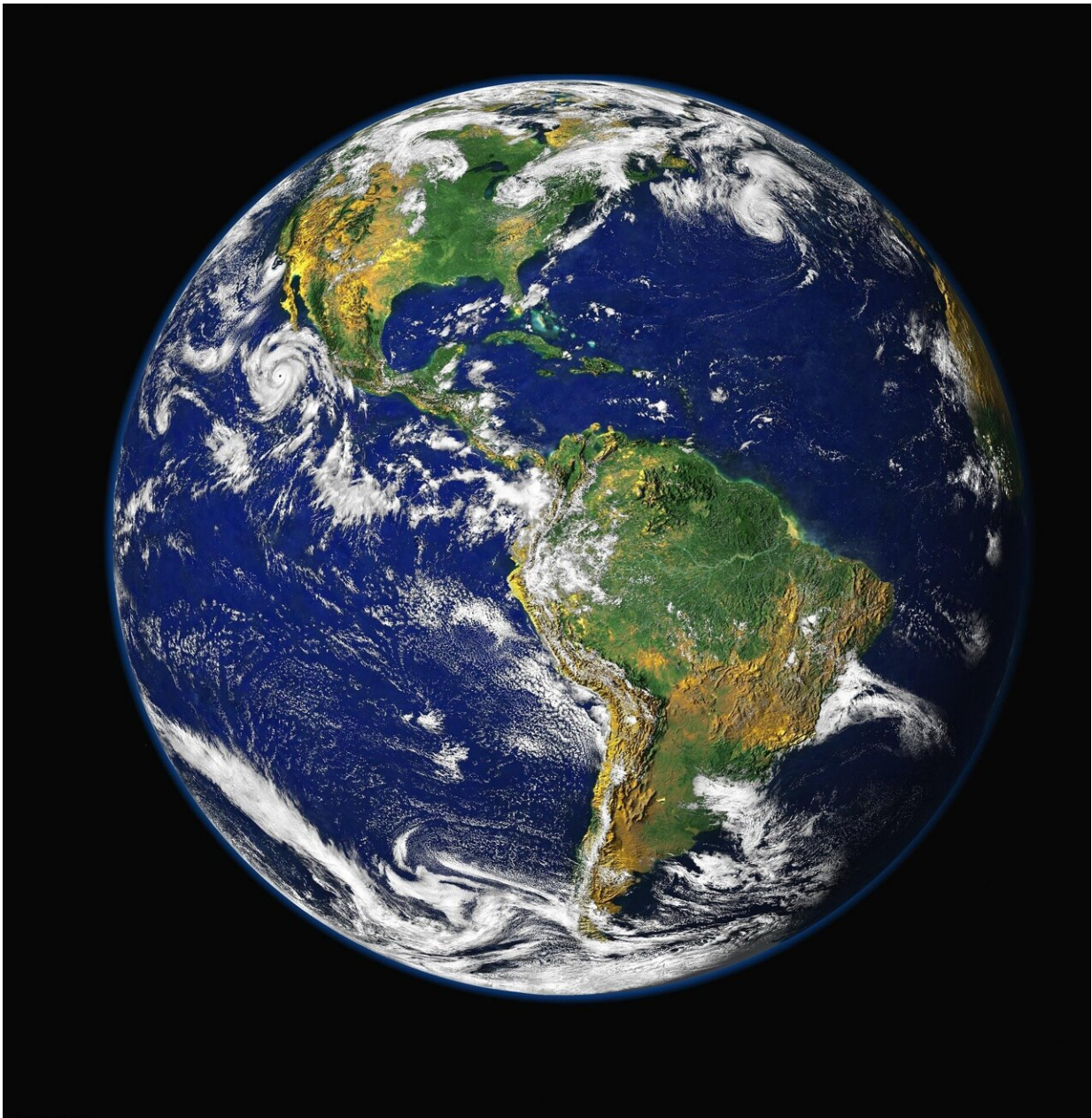


Opinion: Generational and cultural change is stimulating environmental sustainability

May 1 2023, by Steve Cohen



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We continue to live in a world of rapid technological change that constantly engenders economic and cultural transitions. New technologies steadily transform the way we live. We are starting to see this with artificial intelligence, and the world has already been revolutionized by the internet.

In the 20th century, what we might now see as more prosaic inventions like refrigeration, air conditioning, and motor vehicles changed how we ate, where we lived, and where we worked. The positive impacts of science and technology are obvious and integrated into our lifestyles. The [negative impacts](#) are often subjects of denial; the links of cigarettes to cancer, fossil fuels to climate change, and air travel to COVID-19.

A billion people smoke, and last year 7 million died from smoking. The extreme weather due to global warming predicted by turn of the century climate models has arrived. While the COVID-19 pandemic has receded, the health impact was massive, and we are still experiencing the economic and psychological impacts of the pandemic.

These elements of our changing world are not seen as change by young people, but simply as the way the world works. This is the world they have always known. Many of them are frightened and even depressed by the world they are inheriting, but those attitudes of concern are the bedrock of the perceptions that will likely save the planet from complete degradation.

My perceptions of how the world works differs from young people because I have been engaged in environmental policy and politics since

the fall of 1975 when I wandered into a transformative graduate environmental policy seminar at SUNY/Buffalo taught by the late Professor Lester Milbrath. Back then, very few people paid attention to the environment as a policy issue.

EPA was five years old; Earth Day was a new "holiday," and for most people, the environment was a fringe, relatively unimportant issue. Nearly half a century later, it is the central issue of our time. We see signs of its importance everywhere. We also see signs in polling data of a generational shift in attitudes about the environment.

For example, according to a recent web posting by Alec Tyson, Cary Funk, and Brian Kennedy of the Pew Research Center: "While the public is generally reluctant to phase out fossil fuels altogether, younger adults are more open to this idea. Among Americans ages 18 to 29, 50% say the U.S. should use a mix of energy sources, including fossil fuels, while about as many (48%) say the U.S. should exclusively use renewables."

"There are also age differences within both [political parties](#). Among Democrats and Democratic leaners, a majority of those ages 18 to 29 (62%) favor phasing out fossil fuels entirely, compared with about four-in-ten Democrats ages 50 and older. Republicans of all age groups back continuing to use a mix of energy sources, including oil, coal and natural gas. However, about one-in-five Republicans ages 18 to 29 (22%) say the U.S. should phase out [fossil fuels](#) altogether, compared with fewer than one-in-ten Republicans 50 and older."

When young people go to school or work, they are pushing the institutions they are engaged with to reduce their impact on the planet's ecosystems. Investors are making similar demands and have started to require that companies provide data on their environmental footprint and potential risks. This signifies a new level of awareness of the threats to

environmental sustainability.

It is not coming about from ideological sources but rather due to changes in perceptions about how the world works. This new and increasingly dominant social paradigm is built on shared experiences—particularly the growing local impact of extreme weather events. Young people have found their lives disrupted by floods, fires, hurricanes, tornadoes, and power failures; few have been immune to the impact or managed to escape these events, and most relate extreme weather events to climate change.

Today's planet is populated by over eight billion people; the world I grew up in had less than half as many people. While America has made progress in cleaning up its environment, some other parts of the world have not, and other nations have made more progress than we have. The growth of global travel before and since the pandemic has exposed this generation to environmental degradation and extreme poverty.

It has also provided firsthand exposure to cities innovating to enhance environmental quality, NGOs working to help people rise from poverty, and corporations internalizing the values of environmental protection, transparent governance, and a greater concern for their impact on their home communities.

Here in the United States, mistrust of large and powerful institutions such as government, [large corporations](#), and universities has stimulated a widespread attitude of skepticism about the ability of those institutions to serve their stakeholders. In some cases, this drives college and professional school graduates to start up their own private for-profit or not-for-profit organizations. If recent graduates decide to seek and accept employment in established organizations, they may push those organizations to demonstrate commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

In the modern, brain-based economy, these institutions often respond to those demands in order to retain and build the commitment of talented employees. While management hierarchy continues in all organizations, effective management often requires senior managers to provide venues for staff participation and to ensure organizational communication is not purely top-down.

It is ironic that while politics is becoming increasingly polarized, non-profit and for-profit organizations find themselves increasingly open to staff dialogue and efforts at consensus building.

While the Biden Administration and some state and local governments are moving aggressively to stimulate the transition to environmental sustainability, many governments are resisting these efforts at change. Despite these political dynamics, private corporations—pushed by investors, employees, and customers—are internalizing EGS values and practices.

This results in efforts to conduct life cycle analyses on production and consumption processes to minimize environmental impacts. It also includes practices to ensure human resources and management decisions encourage staff and management diversity of every kind. Efforts by right-wing ideologues in politics and the media to label some companies as "woke" are largely ignored by these organizational change agents.

They are ignored because the cultural trend toward greater tolerance is far stronger than the political push for intolerance. Just as people are understanding the connection between extreme weather and climate change because they are experiencing the impacts of [extreme weather](#), young people have friends who come from all over the world, are racially diverse, and have different sexual orientations or changing gender identities. They are experiencing this world and find it easy to resist myths and efforts to demonize difference.

They are not threatened by diversity because they experience it and consider it routine.

I am not blind to the forces of intolerance and hatred. I recognize the degree to which those forces have been enabled by extremist voices in politics and the media. It scares me since it resembles the rise of fascism. The Holocaust is never far from my thought process. Hitler's example is recent enough for some of us to have known some of his victims, and it is an example we should never forget.

Nevertheless, I believe that the size of our tolerant population is far larger than the size of the bigoted purveyors of hate. In the case of environmental protection, we see the extra push it enjoys from the cultural trend toward wellness and concern for health. If the environment is toxic, all the exercise and healthy diet in the world won't protect you.

The people in Cancer Alley, Louisiana, and East Palestine, Ohio, may be of different races and have different political ideologies, but they share a common fear of being poisoned by toxic chemicals. They know they've been poisoned by mismanaged, greedy companies. Political ideology is no match for shared experiences. That is what [young people](#) bring to the transition to environmental sustainability. They see the crowded and endangered planet they are inheriting, and it motivates them to try to protect it.

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