



'Managing' environmental collapse

Cutting greenhouse gases is only part of the way to cope with climate change, says Ruyard Griffiths

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Last week's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report dominated headlines and provided a compelling if not "white-knuckle" analysis of the long-term consequences of global warming for human civilization.

The hair-raising parts of the report weren't simply its much-cited and dire predictions for the year 2100: up to half-a-metre increase in sea levels, more devastating hurricanes, widespread droughts and large-scale population migration all driven by a 2 to 4 degree increase in global temperatures.

Let's face it, most of us have a hard enough time figuring out what next week looks like let alone pondering the fate of the world decades after our demise.

What gave me the jitters was the report's cataloguing of the acceleration of climate change since the 1990s – the period when far too many of us have been complicit consumers of energy "supersized" lifestyles.

Consider the following: Eleven of the last 12 years rank among the warmest since global temperatures were first recorded in 1850. The rate sea levels have risen in the last 10 years is double the proceeding 40.

The same time compression of the effects of climate change is seen in the acidification of our seas, storm intensity and melting of the Arctic ice cap.

In the face of the increasing speed of climate change we should be embarking simultaneously on two divergent tracks to preserve our collective way.

The first is the important but well-worn path of reducing our environmental footprint through energy conservation, increased government regulation, innovation, and international standards – all without killing our economy.

The other track is metaphorically darker and far less well travelled.

This is the road to, and through, what a growing body of public commentators, academics and government policy-makers are calling "managed collapse."

Popularized by Jane Jacobs, Jared Diamond and Thomas Homer-Dixon, adherents of managed collapse argue that the complexity of modern, urban societies is our collective Achilles heel.

Pull one too many threads out of the tapestry of interlocking systems, institutions and social networks that support our established way of life and it will quickly start to unravel.

Specifically, the twin effects of energy scarcity and rapid climate change – factors in history that most often trigger societal collapse – threaten to overwhelm our fragile and co-dependent systems (global food distribution, international financial institutions, disease eradication, etc.).

For believers in managed collapse, smart societies not only cut greenhouse gases they actively reduce the complexity of their social systems and institutions in anticipation of a more globally disconnected and lower-energy future.

While it's easy to dismiss such dire predictions as parodies of *Planet of the Apes*, the central idea of managed collapse – that coping with climate change could mean revamping institutions and practices that we currently think have nothing to do with the environment – is worthy of serious consideration.

Take the UN climate panel's prediction that warmer oceans and Arctic melt could raise sea levels 20 centimetres by mid-century.

Each centimetre rise will translate into the loss of one metre of flat coastal land.

With 100 million people living within a metre of sea level, it's conceivable that there will be millions of environmental refugees a decade from now, let alone at 2050.

To meet the challenges of only this one aspect of climate change, Canada will need to invest massively in its already strained immigration and refugee system. After all, we are a country with an abundance of land and a long tradition of humanitarianism.

We will be expected to do our part to help the millions of people displaced by the climate change we helped create.

Immigration is just one of the many internal policy priorities that we should be moving on now to "manage" the worst effects of climate change.

Beyond immigration, Ottawa would do well to think hard about the long-term consequences of the current fad for decentralizing federal institutions and powers.

Whether it's health care, emergency preparedness or natural resources, devolution adds complexity, and therefore vulnerability, to the very systems and institutions we need to be making simpler and stronger to survive a low-energy, more chaotic and globally disconnected world.

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