

# How to Bring Our Planet Back to Life

In his new book, *Regeneration*, Paul Hawken invites us to create a world worth saving.

By [Paul Hawken](#)

Our planet is telling us a story. Vital connections have been severed between human beings and nature, within nature itself, and between people, religions, governments, and commerce. This disconnection is the origin of the [climate crisis](#); it is the very root—and it is where we discover solutions and actions that can engage all people, regardless of income, race, gender, or belief. We live on a dying planet—a phrase that may have sounded inflated or over the top not long ago. The earth's biological decline is how it adapts to what we are doing. Nature never makes a mistake. We do. The earth will come back to life no matter what. Nations, peoples, and cultures may not. If putting the future of life at the heart of everything we do is not central to our purpose and destiny, why are we here?

Regeneration means putting life at the center of every action and decision. It applies to all of creation—grasslands, farms, people, forests, fish, wetlands, coastlands, and oceans—and it applies equally to family, communities, cities, schools, religion, cultures, commerce, and governments. Nature and humanity are composed of exquisitely complex networks of relationships, without which forests, lands, oceans, peoples, countries, and cultures perish.

The proximate causes of the climate crisis are cars, buildings, wars, deforestation, poverty, oil, corruption, coal, industrial agriculture, overconsumption, and fracking, among others. All have the same origin and impact: the economic structures created to support human well-being degenerate life on Earth, creating loss, suffering, and a heating planet. The financial system is abetting and investing in planetary liquidation—a short-term source of monetary wealth and a near-term cause of biological depletion, poverty, and inequality.

For the past forty years, the most powerful way to reverse global warming was largely overlooked. Fossil-fuel combustion is the primary cause of warming and must cease rapidly; without this, there is no cure. However, in order to stabilize the climate, we need to draw down carbon dioxide and bring it back home. The only effective and timely way to reverse the climate crisis is the regeneration of life in all its manifestations, human and biological. It is also the most compelling, prosperous, and inclusive way. Biological degeneration has brought us to the brink of an unimaginable crisis. To reverse global warming, we need to reverse global degeneration.

Our economic systems, investments, and policies can bring about the degeneration of the world or its regeneration. We are either stealing the future or healing the

future. One description of the current economic system is *extractive*. We take, we dam, we enslave, we exploit, we frack, we drill, we poison, we burn, we cut, we kill. The economy exploits people and the environment. The ongoing cause of degeneration is inattention, apathy, greed, and ignorance. Climate change may leave people feeling as if they have to make a choice between “saving the planet” and their own happiness, well-being, and prosperity. Not at all. Regeneration is not only about bringing the world back to life; it is about bringing each of us back to life. It has meaning and scope; it expresses faith and kindness; it involves imagination and creativity. It is inclusive, engaging, and generous. And everyone can do it. It restores forests, lands, farms, and oceans. It transforms cities, builds green affordable housing, reverses soil erosion, rejuvenates degraded lands, and powers rural communities. Planetary regeneration creates livelihoods—occupations that bring life to people and people to life, work that links us to one another’s well-being. It offers a path out of poverty that provides people with meaning, worthy involvement with their community, a living wage, and a future of dignity and respect.

In December 2020, Dr. Joeri Rogelj of the Grantham Institute in London, a lead author of the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, made a remarkable statement: “It is our best understanding that, if we bring carbon dioxide [emissions] down to net zero, the warming will level off. The climate will stabilize within a decade or two. There will be very little to no additional warming. Our best estimate is zero.” This was a striking change in scientific consensus. For decades it was assumed that if we were able to stop our carbon emissions, the momentum of warming would continue for centuries. That was mistaken. Climate science now indicates that global warming would begin to recede after we achieve zero carbon emissions.

This is a watershed moment in history. The heating planet is our commons. It holds us all. To address and reverse the climate crisis requires connection and reciprocity. It calls for moving out of our comfort zones to find a depth of courage we may never have known. It doesn’t mean being right in a way that makes others wrong; it means listening intently and respectfully, stitching together the broken strands that separate us from life and one another. It means neither hope nor despair; it is action that is courageous and fearless. We have created an astonishing moment of truth. The climate crisis is not a science problem. It is a human problem. The ultimate power to change the world does not reside in technologies. It relies on reverence, respect, and compassion—for ourselves, for all people, and for all life. This is regeneration.

The climate crisis is not the warming of the planet. What unnerves scientists is what warming will do to life *on* the planet. Changes in atmospheric temperature, ocean currents, and melting polar ice could trigger runaway disruption on multiple fronts in rapidly succeeding tipping points. Losses could include more frequent droughts in the tropics that would convert the world's rainforests into [fire-prone savannas](#). Changes in ocean circulation would dramatically alter worldwide weather and agriculture. The rapid increase in fires and pests could lead to the collapse of our northern forests. Ocean heating and acidification could cause the death of every coral reef in the world. The accelerating melting of the Thwaites Glacier in Antarctica would cause a three-foot rise in sea levels. The melting of Arctic permafrost would release massive amounts of ancient stored carbon dioxide and methane. It is difficult, if not incomprehensible, to imagine how these events would affect families, cities, economies, companies, food, politics, and children in more temperate climates. However, it is not difficult for more than two dozen Arctic cultures who are experiencing the impact of the melting Arctic directly and quickly: the Inuit, Yupik, Chukchi, Aleuts, Saami, Nenets, Athabaskan, Gwich'in, and Kalaallit, cultures that have occupied their lands for up to ten thousand years.

Accurate as they may be, climate predictions can obscure another set of tipping points, the numerous small changes and crucially important outcomes that lead to people's involvement and participation, rather than passivity and fear. These are actions that slow, forestall, and transform the climate crisis. Ending the climate crisis means creating a society that is going in the right direction at the right speed [by 2030](#), a rate of change that will lead to zero net emissions before 2050. That means halving emissions by 2030 and then halving them again by 2040. Tens of thousands of organizations, teachers, companies, architects, farmers, Indigenous cultures, and native leaders know what to do and are active in implementation. The current growth of the climate movement is magnificent, but it remains a small fraction of the world. Hundreds of millions of people need to realize that they have agency, that they can take action, and that collectively it is possible to prevent runaway global warming.

The agent who can head off the climate crisis is reading this sentence. Logically, this seems like nonsense—surely individuals are powerless to counter the global drivers and momentum of global warming. That's a fair conclusion if we assume that yesterday's institutions should or will do it for us. There is a debate as to whether individual behavior or government policy is the key to solving the climate crisis. There shouldn't be. We need the involvement of every sector of society, top to bottom, and everything between. It is engaging and fascinating to calculate

one's own carbon footprint, but regeneration takes a different and wider tack, because there is no such thing as a single individual. There is self-identity, and there is being an individual. Being an individual is an ongoing, functional, and intimate connection to the human and living world. When we look at our networks, each of us becomes multitudes. We have different skills and potential, including sharing, electing, demonstrating, teaching, conserving, and diverse means of helping leaders, cities, companies, neighbors, co-workers, and governments become aware and able to act.

Worried that you are not an expert? Almost no one is. But we understand enough. We know how greenhouse gases function and warm the planet; we are seeing greater climate volatility and extreme weather; and we know the primary sources of carbon emissions. We want a stable climate, food security, pure water, clean air, and an enduring future that we can become ancestors to. Cultures, families, communities, lands, professions, and skills vary with every person. The situations we find ourselves in differ. Who better to know what to do at this time, in this place, with your knowledge, than you?

Nevertheless, solving the climate crisis is an unnatural act, one that human beings are ill-equipped to do. Our minds just don't work that way. The idea of a future existential threat is abstract and conceptual. War metaphors about fighting, battling, and combating climate change don't connect either. Who wakes up in the morning excited about mitigating or getting to "net zero" in thirty years? Most people ignore climate headlines, and for good reason. The overwhelming majority focus on current dilemmas, not distant ones, and obstacles that impact one's life now, not in 2050. On the other hand, humans are notably brilliant at joining together to solve problems. Give us immediate threats like an impending cyclone, flood, or hurricane, and we are all over it. If we are going to engage the bulk of humanity to end the climate crisis, the way to do it is counterintuitive: to reverse global warming, we need to address current human needs, not an imagined dystopian future.

If we want to get the attention of humanity, humanity needs to feel it is getting attention. If we are going to save the world from the threat of global warming, we need to create a world worth saving. If we are not serving our children, the poor, and the excluded, we are not addressing the climate crisis. If fundamental human rights and material needs are not met, efforts to stem the crisis will fail. If there are not timely and cumulative benefits for an individual or family, they will focus elsewhere. The needs of people and living systems are often presented as conflicting priorities—biodiversity versus poverty, or forests versus hunger—when in fact the destinies of human society and the natural world are inseparably intertwined, if not identical. Social justice is not a sideshow to the emergency.

Injustice is the cause. Giving every young child an education; providing renewable energy to all; erasing food waste and hunger; ensuring gender equity, economic justice, and shared opportunity; recognizing our responsibility and making amends to myriad communities of the world for past injustices—these and more are at the very heart of what can turn the tide for all of humanity, rich and poor, and everyone between. Reversing the climate crisis is an outcome. Regenerating human security and well-being, the living world, and justice is the purpose.

This requires a worldwide, collective, committed effort. Collectives do not emerge from the tops of institutions. They begin with one person and then another, the invisible social space where commitment and action join and come together to become a dyad, a group, a team, a movement. To put it simply, no one is coming to help. There is not a brain trust that is going to work out the problems while we ponder and wait. The most complex, radical climate technologies on Earth are the human heart, head, and mind, not a solar panel. Just as we stand at the abyss of a climatic emergency, we stand at another remarkable threshold. The rate of understanding and awakening about climate change is increasing exponentially, even skyrocketing. Climate change is becoming experiential rather than conceptual. As weather becomes ever more disruptive, and awareness and concern increase, the movement to reverse the climate crisis will likely become the largest movement in the history of humankind. It took decades to create this moment.

It is natural to worry that it matters little if you are taking action if others are not. From the planet's point of view, there is no difference between a climate denier and someone who understands the problem but does nothing. The number one cause of human change is when people around us change. Research by Stanford neuroscientist Andrew Huberman upends the idea that beliefs determine what we do or what we can do. It is the opposite. Beliefs do not change our actions. Actions change our beliefs. Do you believe there is nothing you can do to make a difference? Logical. Do you fear the future? Understandable. Do you feel stressed about climate change? Sensible. However, stress is your brain telling you to act. Stress is a signal; it is urging you to do something. Not only do actions change your beliefs, your actions change other people's beliefs.

It's not your job to save the planet. The very idea of saving the earth is a burden because you can't do it anyway. Another belief that torques the mind is that carbon is bad. There is no such thing as carbon pollution. Amanda Joy Ravenhill, the wonderful woman I cofounded Project Drawdown with, once quipped that carbon is the element that holds hands and collaborates. It is part and parcel of virtually everything we need, make, and touch, everything that is alive, delicious,

astonishing, and sacred. We have placed extraordinary amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, and we know exactly how we did it and how we continue to do so. It is time to listen to what our home planet is teaching us: Lesson Number 1 is to bring the planet into balance. The earth is forgiving about what that balance should be. It is approximately the average level of atmospheric carbon dioxide seen for the past eight hundred thousand years. The carbon we bring home is the food required to regenerate life on Earth. Feed the earth, heal the climate.

Finally, regeneration is as close to you as your body. You would not be reading this sentence if your body weren't regenerating its 30 trillion cells every nanosecond. Regeneration is what the planet does every second as well. It is the default mode of life. You can kill, poison, burn, or quell life on Earth, but when that ceases, regeneration begins. Now is the time for civilization to regenerate. The key word is *us*. It is everyone's privilege to love the planet, to love the people and place you are with. When asked about the climate crisis, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet [Gary Snyder](#) said the most important thing to do was to not feel guilty; the only way to restore the planet was by loving it. Our job, our privilege, is to bring our life, our practices, our products, our cities, our agriculture, and all else into alignment with the living world and end the climate crisis. We cannot do this if we believe or assume others will do it for us. All initiatives are worthy companions and allies. We have a common interest and that interest can only be served if we come and work together. Welcome to regeneration.

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## **A CLIMATE CHECKLIST**

In his book *The Checklist Manifesto*, Atul Gawande outlines how to make decisions that generate effective action for highly complex problems. As a surgeon, Gawande created checklists similar to the ones pilots and copilots use before flying passenger jets. He wanted to reduce and eliminate medical error for doctors performing operations on one of the most complex systems in the world—the human body. No one, including medical doctors, fully understands the human body, but that does not prevent physicians from being effective surgeons.

The climate crisis is similar. It is an extremely complex system, and there is no one who fully understands it. That can tend to make us believe only experts can solve the crisis. We unintentionally give our power over to technocrats, international leaders, or scientists, and hope they do something and get it right. Few of us are experts, but that does not prevent us from understanding what to do and how to do it. Climate checklists can guide our action. A climate checklist is informed by

straightforward principles. The guidelines are yes or no questions. Every action either moves toward a desired outcome or heads away from it.

1. Does the action create more life or reduce it?
2. Does it heal the future or steal the future?
3. Does it enhance human well-being or diminish it?
4. Does it prevent disease or profit from it?
5. Does it create livelihoods or eliminate them?
6. Does it restore land or degrade it?
7. Does it increase global warming or decrease it?
8. Does it serve human needs or manufacture human wants?
9. Does it reduce poverty or expand it?
10. Does it promote fundamental human rights or deny them?
11. Does it provide workers with dignity or demean them?
12. In short, is the activity extractive or regenerative?

How you apply, score, or evaluate these principles is up to you. Most of what we do does not tick all the boxes. However, like a compass, it shows us the direction and where to go. By employing the guidelines, you pivot and begin, action by action, bit by bit, step by step to create regeneration in your life. What am I eating? Why? How am I feeling? What is happening in my community? What am I wearing? What am I buying? What am I making? And so on.

*Adapted from [Regeneration: Ending the Climate Crisis in One Generation](#) by Paul Hawken. © 2021. Reprinted in arrangement with Penguin Random House LLC ([penguin.com](http://penguin.com)).*

[Paul Hawken](#) is known throughout the world for his work as an environmental activist and founder of ecologically conscious businesses. He is the author of *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History Is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World* and *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*.