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Can We Save The World?

Tormod V. Burkey

This article is the first in a two-part series by Tormod V. Burkey.
Check back next week for Part Two: *Saving the World, How Do We Get Things Done?*

Why are we not acting to save the world? Could it be that we simply don't know how? Typically, we know the sorts of things that need to be done. What we don't know is how to get humanity to act, even when we know that we must.

Why Are We Not Acting To Save the World?

In [his 1987 book](#), famed behaviorist B. F. Skinner outlined a few reasons why we are not acting to save the world, having to do with past evolutionary selection for rapid responses to acute danger rather than to long term, diffuse, risk. Saving the world is to do something about the future, and the future doesn't exist yet, save as a statistical prediction in a haze of uncertainty, like one's fate as an individual smoker. Economists say we discount the future, for more immediate and less uncertain rewards. Predicting specifics about the future in a complex system is hard, and this is particularly true in social systems. Perhaps that causes some people

to be wary even of general predictions by our best scientists. Few sciences have even advanced far enough to engage in prediction. Yet, in questions related to global climate trends, the biodiversity crisis, overexploitation of natural resources, and related environmental threats, we know that we must act, and quickly.

To “save the world” is just a short-hand for solving those large, complex environmental problems that involve tipping points and international dimensions. The presence of tipping points in the dynamics of global ecosystems means that before we know it it may be too late, and that doing just a tiny bit too little, or too late, is equivalent to doing nothing. Our culture, and our democracy, is not used to dealing with issues where it may suddenly be too late and damages are irreversible. The other issues our political system is preoccupied with are less critical, because if you get it wrong, or do too little, you can always go back and fix it later.

Governance in an Increasingly Complex World

Our politicians seem to be an “elite” in name only, whose ambition extends to gaining position, but not to what they want to do with it once they have it. When the rest of us are all too busy or caught up in day-to-day business, or simply too uncoordinated, it becomes all too easy for politicians to ignore the most important issues in the world—where the shit won’t really hit the fan until after they have moved on to other jobs. “Saving the world” should not be just another job... Or one that we are free to perform poorly.

Political scientists like [Scott Barrett](#) have studied what makes a good international agreement, and question why the climate agreements or the Convention on Biological Diversity looks nothing like that, and why negotiators don’t learn from past experiences. In the [Ingenuity Gap](#), Thomas Homer Dixon argues that society is getting ever more complex, and constantly speeding up, and that our ability to handle the situation is not keeping up. The severity of our global environmental problems is escalating and even if we weren't already overwhelmed with the difficulty of doing something about it, we soon would be. Do we understand social systems well enough to plan and carry out an intervention that might actually succeed as needed? Is it possible within and between our weak democracies, given the challenges of getting people to agree even on the simplest of issues?

Psychologists and behavioral scientists have identified a host of cognitive failures that hamper our educational efforts, our political discourse, and our effectiveness at all levels from personal choice and reasoning to our democratic system.

Making Good Choices Generic

We need systems whereby not only idealists behave properly. We trivialize the future of the world by reducing it to small personal actions like daily recycling and transportation choices, without implementing systems that make good choices generic. And making an effort can be demoralizing when all around you others continue to behave just as before, as if oblivious to the challenges we face. People wait for politicians to do something, but politicians can't do anything until people demand it. In any case they don't know what to do without being told. We cannot let them get away with treating "the environment" as just another special interest—but we have been, and why should we think that we will get more effective with more of the same?

In a globalized world, where several global boundaries have already been exceeded, everything is political. Yet we trivialize politics by reducing it to a never-ending string of issues and cases that we endeavor to address in isolation. Even do-gooders attack problems through "projects," partially because that is how funding agencies have structured "the world," when projects are invariably on the wrong scale in both time and space.

We must all do our little bit. But that only works if there are enough of us doing it. Even living a simple life in internally benevolent eco-communes and (temporarily) stable bioregions demands that there are not emergent properties of aggregate human behavior at greater scales. And problems interact. We cannot solve the climate crisis without solving the biodiversity crisis, and vice versa. Can we solve over-fishing without solving ocean acidification, invasive species issues (exacerbated by climate change), eutrophication and soil erosion, over-population, the economic system, and the weaknesses of our democratic systems and international governance?

So, Can We Save the World?

Many of us would answer a simple "No." if asked whether we can save the world. The feeble attempts to "solve" the most important issues of our times are ludicrously out of proportion to the challenges we face. Is it possible to get humanity to take necessary and sufficient action in time? Where the deadline is perhaps uncertain? If not, what institutions are needed? If the conclusion is that we cannot move humanity to necessary and sufficient action in time (with existing institutions), that too is a powerful and important message. What institutions, with what powers and mandates, would be needed to get the required steps implemented? What

processes need to be embarked upon? What can we say about our ability to solve such problems?

“Can we save the world?” should be an important enough question to justify submitting it to our best thinking and a thorough review of everything we know that has bearing upon it. Perhaps it is one that we have shied away from, for fear that a negative answer would breed despair and passivity and become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet it is hard to see that compiling everything we know in an accessible manner could be a bad thing, and realistically assessing the mechanisms that hamstring us when we want to save the world may help us find ways to get around them.

I suggest we organize a seminar series with experts that have worked on mechanisms that hamper our efforts, and people with experiences with existing efforts, to ask the question: “**Can We Save the World?**” The results from such a seminar series should be contained in an edited book of the same title. Anyone willing and able to help make **Can We Save The World?** happen—whether it be planning, fundraising, organizing, participating, facilitating, brainstorming, providing a venue, publishing, whatever—[please get in touch](#).

Tormod V. Burkey is the author of “Ethics For A Full World, or Can Animal-Lovers Save the World?” due out this spring, and a conservation biologist passionate about saving animals, plants and wild places. You can follow his tweets: [@Toruk Makto](#) and/or his blog: [Thor’s Hammer](#).

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