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Can We Save the World? Part II

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This article is the second in a two-part series by Tormod V. Burkey.
Part One: *Can We Save the World?* can be read here.

In our busy and fragmented lives, things have a way of slipping. Ordinary people, politicians, organizations, international bodies, bureaucrats, we all kind of muddle along, trying to keep up with our daily tasks, hoping against hope that the aggregate of our efforts will somehow, magically, produce good overall results. Everyone is too busy to do their job properly. In the words of Raymond Dasmann (1975): "nobody is at the wheel." And perhaps human frailties are such that nobody could, or should be, in charge. But we would still like to do well the things that we want to do. So how do we get things done when we need to?

Like poverty breeds myopia and short-termism, the broader view is often the first casualty in a hectic life. Even among those engaged full time in efforts to save the environment, few dare take a hard look at how much we really achieve. One would like humanity to really make a

concerted effort, to take a deep and brutally honest look for real solutions. And by "solutions" I mean a set of necessary and sufficient steps that are actually implemented; not only the changes needed, but how we can get them implemented. How do we get humanity to actually take the necessary and adequate steps?

Interrelated Challenges

The climate crisis, biodiversity crisis, overfishing and other over-exploitation of natural resources and habitats, are all problems of a nature whereby we may suddenly, and perhaps unbeknown to us, cross a threshold that makes it too late to solve them. Extinction is forever. We wipe out other species at an unprecedented rate and have exceeded several other planetary boundaries. We do not know how or when the loss of individual species will manifest on the larger scale of ecosystem integrity and suitability for other life forms.

Can we fix the biodiversity crisis without fixing the climate crisis? Can we fix the biodiversity crisis and the climate crisis without changing the economic system? Can we solve large problems given the weaknesses of our democracy? Can a weak democracy fix itself? Can we build better institutions within the existing framework or do we need to go beyond the existing framework? Can smaller questions like overfishing/over-harvesting, invasive species, strife and poverty be fixed without fixing the larger problems of climate, biodiversity crisis, economic crisis, population crisis, institutional crises, and the weaknesses of our current (democratic) model? Can you save one species, without saving a host of other species that it interacts with, and solving the problems of habitat loss and over-exploitation?

Choosing What We Care About

Finding real solutions depends on what you are willing to do. Which, in turn, depends on how desperate you are, and how severe you perceive the situation to be. Great problems are not to be taken lightly. Nor can one blindly hope that things will, somehow, turn out OK, and keep plodding along as before.

This is partly a question of values. Our ethics. In the absence of a God that gives value to things, we all have to choose what it is that we care about.

Barriers to Action

Checks and balances were built into our systems so major upheaval (and abuses of power) would not occur, but in the kinds of problems addressed here you actually need some major action to be taken at times. In the internet age power seems to be more decentralized and fragmented than ever before. Power is relative. By one definition, power is the ability to get someone to do something they wouldn't ordinarily do. When everyone has power, no one has power. Powers cancel each other out, unless one party can forge larger alliances than others. Such alliances can be unwieldy and flighty. With an increasing number of checks and balances, and a growing number of micro-powers, paralysis and inaction may easily result.

The dysfunctionality of the US political landscape might convince anybody of the futility of concerted action, and international cooperation is certainly no easier. You get three people in a room together, and typically they can't agree on anything.

It is hard for anyone to act unilaterally. Unilateral action is much more expensive (and perhaps impossible), than to act as part of a larger group. In the absence of global consensus, can one start in smaller groupings while exploiting mechanisms that encourage others to join in?

Does a Solution Exist?

Can we ever know what is necessary and sufficient? Perhaps it is easier to just start doing something. And hoping that of all the independent and uncoordinated efforts something will pan out. But is it really wise to proceed without asking whether what we are doing is adequate, or at least thinking about how it can be scaled up to meaningful proportions?

A solution is not a solution unless it is implemented. We need to know not only what is needed, but how we get humanity to actually do it. Like Archimedes, we need a firm point on which to stand and a long enough lever to move the world.

When mathematicians are working on a particularly difficult problem, they sometimes try to show whether or not a solution exists at all before trying to find it. This can be a very powerful exercise.

What do we know?

What are the problems we need to overcome to enable humanity to act? 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. Each chapter in such a book should compile what we know about each set of mechanisms that make saving the world difficult in practice. Presenting what we know in each of the related fields and brainstorming around the issues should help us make some progress towards finding ways of getting around these obstacles.

Subtopics for analysis/book chapters might include:

- Why are we not acting to save the world?

- How to make good international agreements.

- Acting unilaterally in a connected world.

- Our current democratic system: designed so nothing much will change, so what do you do when something really needs to change? Can a weak democracy fix itself?

- Our future democratic system: What are the characteristics of a system that works when you need it to? Democracy is a matter of degree, not simply that you have it or you don't. What measures can we put in place to improve our democracy?

- War-time economies and how we got things done when we needed to. Are any of the tools from war-time and states of emergency applicable for us now?

- An international system that works: What is needed in (a) super-national institution(s) to save the world?

- Time constraints: Can we make it in time? How to deal with irreversible damage and systems with break points, tipping points and positive feed-back loops.

- Everyone doing their little bit: What if there are not enough doing it? Can we get enough people involved in time? How could you ever know what is necessary and sufficient?

- Is inter-disciplinary research/collaboration possible? What models work best for teams that want to get things done?

- Can we get society to use the knowledge and the experience that we already have?

- Can we plan in complex systems? If complexity, unknown unknowns, social contagion, accidents of history, punctuated equilibrium, and our proneness to a diversity of fallacies limit our power to predict, what hope is there for planning?

- Super wicked problems and general approaches to solving them. What do we know about how to solve super wicked problems?

- Process versus results: if you can't plan for results, does the uncoordinated, multipronged, decentralized, unplanned, trial and error approach actually make sense?

- What role is there for the legal system, international or domestic? Law is usually pretty conservative. Can it lead?

- A new economy: Are real solutions compatible with our current economic and monetary systems? What are the traits of an economic system where we actually could save the world?

- Dealing with uncertainty: Can we act responsibly under uncertainty? Will science ever get to the point where politicians and bureaucrats will/can take meaningful action?

- A role for coercion? How would it work? Are there feasible and acceptable ways to coerce our own populace, or that of other nations?

- Trans-border problems. To what extent can a problem be effectively addressed within a single nation or other administrative boundary? What do we know to be useful when we have to solve trans-border or multinational problems?

- Communication: How to communicate effectively for action. What do we know about social movements?

- The strategic mindset: Tools for strategic and tactical organizing. How to win the battle *and* the war.

- What difference does a problem make? Does the solution depend on the nature of the problem?

- Interactive problems. Can we solve the different problems in isolation, when they are interdependent?

- Technofixes: Is this all we can hope for?

- Exploitable social tipping points in solutions. Can we use our knowledge of the dynamics of social systems to exploit the nature of tipping points and social trigger points in our quest for solutions?

- A new story for our existence. Do we need a new narrative for humanity in order to make fundamental changes in our lives, communities and mentalities necessary to address root causes of the threats we are facing?

Anyone willing and able to help make **Can We Save The World?**, the seminar series/book, 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 Tormod on Twitter @Toruk_Makto and/or his blog: Thor's Hammer.

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