

We Need an Ecological Civilization Before It's Too Late

Jeremy Lent



Photo by [Aliena Lang](#)

In the face of climate breakdown and ecological overshoot, alluring promises of “green growth” are no more than magical thinking. We need to restructure the fundamentals of our global cultural/economic system to cultivate an “ecological civilization”: one that prioritizes the health of living systems over short-term wealth production.

We’ve now been warned by the world’s leading climate scientists that we have just twelve years to limit climate catastrophe. The UN’s International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [has put the world on notice](#) that going from a 1.5° to 2.0° C rise in temperature above preindustrial levels would have disastrous consequences across the board, with unprecedented flooding, drought, ocean devastation, and famine.

Meanwhile, the world’s current policies [have us on track](#) for more than 3° increase by the end of this century, and climate scientists publish dire warnings that amplifying feedbacks could [make things far worse](#) than even these projections, and thus [place at risk](#) the very continuation of our civilization. We need, [according to the IPCC](#), “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.” But what exactly does that mean?

Last month, at the [Global Climate Action Summit](#) (GCAS) in San Francisco, luminaries such as Governor Jerry Brown, Michael Bloomberg, and Al Gore gave their version of what's needed with [an ambitious report](#) entitled "Unlocking the Inclusive Growth Story of the 21st Century by the New Climate Economy." It trumpets a [New Growth Agenda](#): through enlightened strategic initiatives, they claim, it's possible to transition to a low-carbon economy that could generate millions more jobs, raise trillions of dollars for green investment, and lead to higher global GDP growth.

But these buoyant projections by mainstream leaders, while overwhelmingly preferable to the Republican Party's malfeasance, are utterly insufficient to respond to the crisis facing our civilization. In promising that the current system can fix itself with a few adjustments, they are turning a blind eye to [the fundamental drivers](#) propelling civilization toward collapse. By offering false hope, they deflect attention from the profound structural changes that our global economic system must make if we hope to bequeath a flourishing society to future generations.

Ecological overshoot

That's because even the climate emergency is merely a harbinger of other existential threats looming over humanity as a result of ecological overshoot—the fact that we're depleting the earth's natural resources at a faster rate than they can be replenished. As long as government policies emphasize growing GDP as a national priority, and as long as transnational corporations [relentlessly pursue greater shareholder returns](#) by ransacking the earth, we will continue accelerating toward global catastrophe.

Currently, our civilization is running at [40% above its sustainable capacity](#). We're rapidly depleting the earth's [forests](#), [animals](#), [insects](#), [fish](#), [freshwater](#), even the [topsoil](#) we require to grow our crops. We've already transgressed three of the [nine planetary boundaries](#) that define humanity's safe operating space, and yet global GDP is expected to [more than double](#) by mid-century, with potentially irreversible and devastating consequences. By 2050, it's estimated, [there will be more plastic](#) in the world's oceans than fish. Last year, over fifteen thousand scientists from 184 countries [issued an ominous warning](#) to humanity that time is running out: "Soon it will be too late," they wrote, "to shift course away from our failing trajectory."

Techno-optimists, including many of the GCAS dignitaries, like to dismiss these warnings with talk of "green growth"—essentially decoupling GDP growth from increased use of resources. While that would be a laudable goal, a number of studies have shown that it's [simply not feasible](#). Even the most wildly aggressive assumptions for greater efficiency would still result in consuming global resources [at double the sustainable capacity](#) by mid-century.

A desperate situation indeed, but one that need not lead to despair. In fact, there is a scenario where we can turn around this rush to the precipice and redirect humanity to a thriving future on a regenerated earth. It would, however, require us to rethink some of the sacrosanct beliefs of our modern world, beginning with the unquestioning reliance on [perpetual economic growth](#) within a global capitalist system directed by transnational corporations [driven exclusively by the need](#) to increase shareholder value for their investors.

In short, we need to change the basis of our global civilization. We must move from a civilization based on wealth production to one based on the health of living systems: an ecological civilization.

An ecological civilization

The crucial idea behind an ecological civilization is that our society needs to change at a level far deeper than most people realize. It's not just a matter of investing in renewables, eating less meat, and driving an electric car. The intrinsic framework of our global social and economic organization needs to be transformed. And this will only happen when enough people recognize the destructive nature of our current mainstream culture and reject it for one that is life-affirming—embracing values that emphasize growth in the quality of life rather than in the consumption of goods and services.

A change of such magnitude would be an epochal event. There have been only two occasions in history when radical dislocations led to a transformation of virtually every aspect of the human experience: the Agricultural Revolution that began about twelve thousand years ago, and the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century. If our civilization is to survive and prosper through the looming crises of this century, we will need a transformation of our values, goals, and collective behavior on a similar scale.

An ecological civilization would be based on the core principles that sustain living systems coexisting stably in natural ecologies. Insights into how ecologies self-organize offer a model for how we could organize human society in ways that could permit sustainable abundance. Organisms prosper when they develop multiple symbiotic relationships, wherein each party to a relationship both takes and gives reciprocally. In an ecology, energy flows are balanced and one species' waste matter becomes nourishment for another. Entities within an ecology scale fractally, with microsystems existing as integral parts of larger systems to form a coherent whole. In a well-functioning ecosystem, each organism thrives by optimizing for its own existence within a network of relationships that enhances the common good. The inherent resilience caused by these dynamics means that—without human disruption—ecosystems can maintain their integrity for many thousands, and sometimes millions, of years.

In practice, transitioning to an ecological civilization would mean restructuring some of the fundamental institutions driving our current civilization to destruction. In place of an economy based on perpetual growth in GDP, it would institute one that emphasized quality of life, using alternative measures such as a [Genuine Progress Indicator](#) to gauge success. Economic systems would be based on respect for individual dignity and fairly rewarding each person's contribution to the greater good, while ensuring that nutritional, housing, healthcare, and educational needs were fully met for everyone. Transnational corporations [would be fundamentally reorganized](#) and made accountable to the communities they purportedly serve, to optimize human and environmental wellbeing rather than shareholder profits. Locally owned cooperatives would become the default organizational structure. Food systems would be designed to emphasize local production using [state-of-the-art agroecology](#) practices in place of

fossil fuel-based fertilizer and pesticides, while manufacturing would prioritize [circular flows](#) where efficient re-use of waste products is built into the process from the outset.

In an ecological civilization, the local community would be the basic building block of society. Face-to-face interaction would regain ascendance as a crucial part of human flourishing, and each community's relationship with others would be based on principles of mutual respect, learning, and reciprocity. Technological innovation would still be encouraged, but would be prized for its effectiveness in enhancing the vitality of living systems rather than minting billionaires. The driving principle of enterprise would be that we are all interconnected in the web of life—and long-term human prosperity is therefore founded on a healthy Earth.

Cultivating a flourishing future

While this vision may seem a distant dream to those who are transfixed by the daily frenzy of current events, innumerable pioneering organizations around the world are already planting the seeds for this cultural metamorphosis.

In China, President Xi Jinping [has declared](#) an ecological civilization to be a central part of his long-term vision for the country. In Bolivia and Ecuador, the related values of [buen vivir](#) and [sumak kawsay](#) ("good living") are written into the constitution, and in Africa the concept of [ubuntu](#) ("I am because we are") is a widely-discussed principle of human relations. In Europe, hundreds of scientists, politicians, and policy-makers recently [co-authored a call](#) for the EU to plan for a sustainable future in which human and ecological wellbeing is prioritized over GDP.

Examples of large-scale thriving cooperatives, such as [Mondragon](#) in Spain, demonstrate that it's possible for companies to provide effectively for human needs without utilizing a shareholder-based profit model. Think tanks such as [The Next System Project](#), [The Global Citizens Initiative](#), and the [P2P Foundation](#) are laying down parameters for the political, economic, and social organization of an ecological civilization. Meanwhile, visionary authors such as [Kate Raworth](#) and [David Korten](#) have written extensively on how to reframe the way we think about our economic and political path forward.

As the mainstream juggernaut drives our current civilization inexorably toward breaking point, it's easy to dismiss these steps toward a new form of civilization as too insignificant to make a difference. However, as the current system begins to break down in the coming years, increasing numbers of people around the world will come to realize that a fundamentally different alternative is needed. Whether they turn to movements based on prejudice and fear or join in a vision for a better future for humanity depends, to a large extent, on the ideas available to them.

One way or another, humanity is headed for the third great transformation in its history: either in the form of global collapse or a metamorphosis to a new foundation for sustainable flourishing. An ecological civilization offers a path forward that may be the only true hope for our descendants to thrive on Earth into the distant future.

Jeremy Lent is author of [*The Patterning Instinct: A Cultural History of Humanity's Search for Meaning*](#), which investigates how different cultures have made sense of the universe and how their underlying values have changed the course of history. He is founder of the nonprofit [Liology Institute](#), dedicated to fostering a sustainable worldview. For more information visit jeremylent.com.



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