

What can we do?

Rex Weyler



Rainbow over the Tapajós River in the Amazon. © Todd Southgate / Greenpeace

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At the University of Minnesota [Dr. Nate Hagens](#) teaches an honours course called “Reality 101: A Survey of the Human Predicament.” Hagens operated his own hedge fund on Wall Street until he glimpsed, “a serious disconnect between capitalism, growth, and the natural world. Money did not appear to bring wealthy clients more well being.” Hagens became editor of [The Oil Drum](#), and now sits on the Board of the [Post Carbon Institute](#) and the [Institute for Integrated Economic Research](#). Reality 101 addresses humanity’s toughest challenges: economic decline, inequality, pollution, biodiversity loss, and war. Students learn about systems ecology, neuroscience, and economics. “We ask hard questions,” says Hagens. “What is wealth? What are the limits to growth? We attempt to face our crises head on.”

Some students feel inspired to action, and some report finding the material “depressing.” One student shared the course material with a family member, who asked, “So what can I do?” The student struggled to answer this question, and the listener chastised her: “why did you explain all this to me, if you can’t tell me what to do?!”

A fair question. One that, as environmentalists, we often get asked. At the request of Dr Hagens, here is my list:

What can we do?

I have been asking this question all of my adult life. As I've witnessed the crisis intensify, I've experienced feelings of panic, anger, and helplessness. Nevertheless, I also feel at peace. I love my family and friends, I enjoy life in my community, and love my time in the natural world. Here are some of the ways I believe we can deal with anxiety about the world and take action:

Stay active

It can feel good to simply [resist](#) the destructive acts of governments and corporations, to stand up for the dispossessed, abused, and for the natural world. Caring about others can be the greatest gift to one's own soul and peace of mind.

Localize

Even as I engage in global battles, my life revolves around family, neighbours, friends, and finding ways to help strengthen my community. Protect *your* local habitat; preserve a local river, a lake, or forest. I believe that most genuine "solutions" that matter will appear at a community-in-habitat level. The priorities:

- Build community cohesion with communication, events, joy, sharing, etc.
- Preserve and restore local ecosystems; protect wild places
- Teach, educate, learn, share information
- Promote local energy systems
- Plant gardens, grow food
- Learn localized community health care

Accept complexity

The question, "What can I do?" typically seeks a linear answer to a complex, [whole-system challenge](#). "What can I do?" often wants a "solution" for a "problem." This sort of linear thinking helped create the predicament we're in. Changing a complex living system is not a linear, mechanistic "solution." We have to remain humble in this struggle. We are small. Life is short. Nature is expansive, complex, and long.

Love and trust nature

Spend time in the natural world without trying to “fix” it. Sit with wildness and absorb it, love it, and respect it. Apprentice yourself to nature, and what you learn will help when you engage in the human realm to defend that wildness. Trust nature. She will be fine. Humans will not “destroy the Earth.” We cause harm to the biosphere, drive species to extinction, and alter Earth’s climate, but we cannot touch the regenerative power of wild nature. Earth will be fine.

“Sharpen the sword”

This is a Buddhist precept. You are the sword. You are the tool that you take into battle. Keep that tool sharp. Be prepared. In Buddhism, the sharpening comes from meditation and acts of compassion. There are other methods, such as yoga, art, and the worship of mystery. We sharpen the sword by working on ourselves, making ourselves better human beings and better agents of change.

In my experience, the weakest link in social movements is the ego: pride, wanting credit, wanting fame, wanting to be admired, wanting power, and so forth. When we sharpen the sword, we quiet our own ego so that we become a calming influence rather than a source of anxiety for others.

These five principles are the bedrock for me. And still, this is just the beginning, because once we unlock the confidence to act, and as we turn out to the world, the more challenging work begins.

How can we change the world?

We may benefit if we simultaneously hold two extremes of action; both the huge, universal movements for [ecology](#) and [justice](#) and the daily, [personal actions](#) that help slightly and make us better examples to others.

Part I – The big, universal movements

Our priorities of action are unlikely to be the same as the priorities of status quo society. Humanity is in a state of [ecological overshoot](#), and all pathways out of overshoot require contraction. Few institutions like the idea of getting smaller, simplifying, or reversing the scale of human activity. Technology can provide benefits, but there are no technologies that eliminate the ecological requirement of contraction to heal the biological foundation of our civilization.

Here are the areas that need the most attention:

1. Consumption

Humanity has been hugely successful at consuming Earth's bounty, but we have already [overshot many of her limits](#). Reducing consumption is imperative, and of course, this has to start with the frivolous, wasteful consumption of the rich world. Some ideas:

- Start a campaign to reduce extravagant travel.
- Lobby for heavy tax incentives to slow indulgent, leisure consumption.
- Transform the idea of "fashion." Make modesty the [new fashion statement](#).
- Organize your community to recycle and [repair everything](#).
- Help popularize modest consumption and a simpler lifestyle.
- Start a campaign for shoppers to leave all packaging at the stores.

2. Population

Find ways to help stabilize and reduce human population. Some human rights activists fear that population efforts might violate human rights, but crowding already erodes human rights. Humans and our livestock now comprise 96% of all mammal biomass on Earth. There are limits.

All we need to do is reduce the human growth rate from +1% per year to -1% per year. Reversing [human sprawl](#) makes life better for everyone and shows respect for all life. The most graceful and effective strategies to stabilize and reduce the growth rate are simple and have other social benefits:

- Help establish universal women's rights, the right to plan pregnancy and childbirth.
- Campaign for universally available free contraception.
- Overcome the fear and taboo about discussing the human population growth rate.
- Help popularize smaller families and family planning.

3. Energy

Find ways to help reduce energy demand, reduce fossil fuel use, and support renewable energy.

4. Militarism

Campaign to end militarism and weapons industries in all forms at every level.

Consumption, population, petroleum fuels, and militarism remain the four major drivers of our ecological crisis. The underlying psychological drivers may be greed, fear and ignorance. Meanwhile, there are hundreds, thousands of interconnected issues that need attention too.

Here are just 19:

1. [Reduce meat consumption](#), reduce livestock herds, through taxes and lifestyle changes.
2. Support and preserve the cultures and lifestyles among **Indigenous** and modest farmer communities.
3. Campaign to limit **corporate power** in politics.
4. Campaign to **publicly fund universities**, all education, to limit corporate corruption of education.
5. Start an **economic de-growth** group. Start a campaign to create a new micro-economic system in your community, your state, your county, your nation, your company, your family.
6. Start a school for the **homeless** and disenfranchised; teach localized, useful skills, gardening, tool repairs.
7. Lobby your local government to create community **gardens**.
8. Study and create renewable **energy systems** that can be built, operated, and maintained locally.
9. Campaign to consume only **locally produced products**; reduce the energy cost of transported goods.
10. Start or join campaigns to preserve ecosystems, rivers, lakes, the oceans, [forests](#), **biodiversity**, and all non-human habitats.
11. Open or join a **clinic** and begin to research localized, small-scale healthcare.
12. [Lobby governments](#) to create **walking neighbourhoods**; ban cars from city centres, create public transit projects, and make cities serve community.
13. Start a **company** that uses local resources and local skills to create useful locally consumed tools and resources.
14. Start a **“free store”** in your community, where people can drop off used goods, and pick up useful used items they may need.
15. Start a local **support group** or psychology practice and begin to learn and support community therapy; build community trust; help others deal with depression and anxiety. The best therapy is a friend.
16. **Legal support**: are you a lawyer, or do you want to be? Could you work as a paralegal? Start a practice to defend ecology activists, and start class action lawsuits against corporations that pollute.

17. Start or join a campaign to impose carbon taxation and other **pollution charges** on contaminating products; lobby for resource depletion fees, true cost pricing, and import tariffs on ecologically dangerous goods.
18. Help **restore damaged ecosystems**; lobby governments and corporations to make funds available to restore damaged ecosystems; plant trees, build soils, re-establish natural water flows.
19. Start or join a campaign to achieve **whatever** is close and dear to your heart.

Part II – Personal Lifestyle

Even if small, personal actions might not shift the whole world, those actions count. Your personal actions become a model for others, and the personal lifestyle changes of individuals add up. These 12 actions will bring you closer to nature, closer to yourself, and closer to friends and allies, who share your beliefs and concerns:

1. Grow food, **plant gardens**, learn horticulture, plant fruit trees.
2. Spend as much time in **wild nature** as possible, pay attention, observe, contemplate.
3. **Fix everything**. Have a fix-it shop with tools and supplies. Fix things for your family, friends and neighbours. Teach others how to fix things. Repair clothes.
4. Stand up to bullies in every possible way; don't let individuals, corporations, or governments bully you, your family, or your neighbours. You can do this with **kindness and grace**, and with inner strength. And don't be bullied by popular, conventional perceptions.
5. **Share** everything you can. Help others trust in sharing. Create community cohesion by organizing ways to share resources, tools, or public land.
6. Take in a homeless foster child; give them some **love and security**; help create one less wounded soul, floundering and struggling in the world.
7. Find ways to **use your training**, career, or job to further ecological and social justice goals. Talk to coworkers. Create recycling, sharing, and promote modest consumption in your workplace.
8. **Create art**, music, theatre, dance. Artistic work can express human creativity without frivolous consumption; art builds self-confidence and leads to creative interaction with others. Create art events, start a gallery or performance space. Help young people find their creative spirit. Help your community learn to entertain itself with its own creativity rather than rely on globalized, electronic, high-consumption entertainment.
9. Accept that there is no miracle technology that is going to allow us to continue living this endless growth, high consumption, self-indulgent, expanding population,

fossil-fueled, presumptuous, human-centred life. Change is inevitable. Simplicity is the new “progress.” Accept it and **be at peace** with that.

10. Create **discussion groups**, in person and online, about all of these actions. Help others feel comfortable living simpler lives, taking action, and building a genuinely sustainable future world.
11. Find a **spiritual practice** that helps you calm down and see the world with more compassion and patience, and that helps you appreciate the more-than-human world.
12. **Educate yourself**, forever. The issues are complex, non-linear, and linked. Learn how complex living systems actually work. Educate yourself about wild nature, evolution, and scientific complexity. Accept that the universe is beyond comprehension, but continue the effort to comprehend:

Read “Small Arcs of Larger Circles” by Nora Bateson.

Read “The Collapse of Complex Societies” by Joseph Tainter.

Read Arne Naess, Chellis Glendinning, David Abram, and Paul Shepard.

Read Gregory Bateson, Janine Benyus, William Catton, and other ecology writers.

Read Rachel Carson, Basho, Li Po, William Blake, Mary Oliver, Denise Levertov, Gary Snyder, Susan Griffin, Nanao Sakaki, and other poets who honour nature.

Go to art galleries. Contemplate the connection between creative artistic expression and change in a complex system. See the art in nature and the nature in art.

Learn about the errors of modern, neoliberal economics, and learn about other ways to approach economics. Read: N. Georgescu-Roegen, Herman Daly, Donella Meadows, Mark Anielski.

Learn about how energy really works. Read Vaclav Smil, Bill Rees, and Howard Odum

Read Wendell Berry: “Solving for Pattern” and “Gift of Good Land.”

See if you can fall in love with something that’s not human. See if you can fall in love with wild nature.

Practice equanimity, calmness even in the face of uncertainty or tragedy; the first rule of all First Aid training: the responder should remain calm.

Help re-establish terms such as the common good, public interest, and collective benefit back into political and social discourse.

Accept that “the world” is a complex living system, made from living subsystems out of your control. Let go of “changing the world” with human cleverness, and be content to influence your community and ecosystems where you can.

Get creative about helping. Talk with friends and colleagues. Invent new ways to contribute to the principles of slower consumption, smaller populations, cooperative communities, peace, and restored ecosystems.

There are many actions we can take to help. Take your pick. They all count. Teach them. Discuss them. Add to the list.

Readers’ suggestions:

Collaborate with others who share your values; divide the complexity into manageable parts.

Simon Grant

Take care of one’s own physical and mental health. Create daily windows free from anxiety-inducing information (most electronic media). It works best if such a window precedes bed-time so that you can close your eyes without thinking about the news. ***Lucas Durand***

For youth in privileged countries:

Defer having children or do not have children.

Attend bush-craft survival courses and practice the skills. You may need them. ***Mike Haywood***

Don’t focus on small details of problems to avoid the anxiety-producing big picture. When mired in detail, move your vision to the next scale up. ***Mary Odum***

Also see the 12 tips to Making Sense Of The World by Caitlin Johnstone and the manifesto for a new coexistence pact, with similar sensible proposals. ***Pedro Prieto***

Read:

- 1) Richard Heinberg, “The End of Growth”
- 2) Chris Martenson, “The Crash Course”
- 3) Charles Hugh Smith, “Survival +”
- 4) Nafeez Ahmed, “The Crisis of Civilization”

5) John Michael Greer, "The Long Descent"

6) James Howard Kunstler, "The Long Emergency" **Steve Bull**

Study cognitive history, and how cultural values shape history, including Jeremy Lent's The Patterning Instinct. **Rick Ingrasci**

Resources and Links:

"Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity," J. Rockström, et. al., [Ecology and Society](#), 2009.

The nine planetary boundaries, [Stockholm Resilience Centre](#)

[The Oil Drum](#)

[Post Carbon Institute](#)

Nora Bateson, "Small Arcs of Larger Circles": Deep Green [review](#) and book at ([Triarchy Press](#), 2016).

William Catton, [Overshoot](#), University of Illinois, 1980.

William Rees, "[The Way Forward: Survival 2100](#)," Solutions Journal v.3, #3, June 2012

Donella Meadows, et. al., [Limits to Growth](#) (D. H. Meadows, D. L. Meadows, J. Randers, W. Behrens, 1972; New American Library, 1977); and [Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update](#) (Chelsea Green, 2004).

Rex Weyler was a director of the original Greenpeace Foundation, the editor of the organization's first newsletter, and a co-founder of Greenpeace International in 1979.

Rex's column reflects on the roots of activism, environmentalism, and Greenpeace's past, present, and future. The opinions here are his own.

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