

Can We Save the World? Part III.

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This article is the third in the series “Can We Save the World?” by Tormod V. Burkey. See [Part I](#) and [Part II](#), or the book “[Ethics for a Full World](#)”.

I need help writing a book. An edited book, titled “Can we save the world?”, outlining the disparate mechanisms that make it hard for us to solve environmental problems involving international dimensions and tipping points.

If I knew what the answer was I could write the book myself, but it would be much better, and more useful if it involved experts in each of the fields that touch upon these challenges. We would each contribute to separate chapters of the book, following a workshop or seminar series where authors and contributors would discuss across disciplines, learn from each other, and develop ideas further.

No one person knows the answer, and no one can speak authoritatively on all the fields and disciplines that come into play. We would also include people with real experience in trying to make things happen, and with efforts in the international arena. Some key areas are: complex systems, international treaties, economic systems, tipping points, dynamic systems theory, democracy problems, behavioral dynamics, communication and social organizing, institution building, risk management, international law, ecology, power structures, game theory, planning, dealing with uncertainty, and the cognitive failures and biases that affect us all.

It was a mistake to simply assume, as many scientists and organizations seem to have been doing, that once the facts were known and people just *understood*, then humanity would act.

There must have been lots of brainstorming sessions and strategy sessions for individual efforts, and presumably, every project has one, or several. Most ongoing efforts look at ways to solve the problem or problems. They try to do what they can do. This is more of a meta-approach.

Our book would ask “could we?” save the world, by explicitly studying the factors and mechanisms that make such an undertaking difficult and compiling it all in a single volume. Hopefully, this could become a resource for anyone who seeks to make a real difference.

How much effort has gone into thinking through the structure and process of international efforts like the climate and biodiversity negotiations? Or even less complex matters such as the exploitation of marine “resources”? To what extent have participants studied lessons from past processes, and the mechanisms one needs to know about and understand in order to make good international agreements? How would we design such processes if we really wanted to be successful? How would we design institutions that we wanted to be successful at dealing with processes that involve tipping points and international dimensions?

It may be that a disorganized and multi-pronged, haphazard approach might work, but in any case, that is something that we should think through concertedly. Is there a rational way to proceed? If so, what distinguishes good ways from bad ways? What would happen if we put some serious thought and effort into designing a good process? I would be more comfortable if we really thought it through. And made the knowledge we acquired thereby more widely and easily available.

Previous efforts have tended to look at what measures need to be instigated to reach certain goals. For instance, Project Drawdown has gone to great effort to quantify and rank the sources of climate emissions and rank “solutions” that are needed to reach climate goals. But, as per usual, it says nothing about what would be needed in order to go about making such changes actually happen. In my mind, it is not a solution unless it is actually carried out. And we need to figure out how to get humanity to actually do these things in time. Such a road map needs to be part of any solution.

Demonstrating that it is still theoretically feasible to reach the 1.5-degree target, or the 2-degree target, is a valuable contribution. Knowing what would be necessary and sufficient would be key to any solution. At least if we were to try and reach such solutions through guided and coordinated efforts.

One could see how it would be tempting to leave unto others the business of figuring out how to actually go about doing it. It is of course also possible that trying to figure out how to get the job

done would founder on too many hypotheticals. It may be that we would always be doomed to make the kinds of statements: “If we can get enough politicians to do x, then...”, “If we can get enough countries to enact y, then...”, “If we can get people to support z, then...” The real question is always: *how* do we get people to do x, y, and z? No analysis is complete before this core conundrum is resolved.

But can we ever really know what is necessary and sufficient? If we can’t figure this out, would we be better off taking a multi-pronged, distributed, and uncoordinated trial-and-error approach? Or are we relegated to putting our faith in technofixes? What if there are some problems that are amenable to technofixes and others that are not? Are there classes of problems we can fix, and classes of problems that we can’t? If so, what are the critical characteristics defining this dichotomy? Would we be correct in focussing on process rather than outcome? Do we know how to design good processes? Necessary and sufficient processes?

This effort would also take on the interaction of different existential threats, like biodiversity meltdown and climate breakdown, not merely look at particular problems in isolation. It would face up to the challenges of tipping points, and how our systems are not accustomed to dealing with problems where there is a huge struggle against the clock and where it may become too late, dealing with irreversible change.

There is no shortage of people, or organizations, that will tell you we have to do this or we have to do that. But are all these things really necessary, or, together, would they be sufficient? They tell us we have to have x, and we have to have y. But how do they know, and do we really? And anyway, the big question is, as always, *how* do we get humanity to do those things that are necessary and sufficient? **As part of gaining some traction on this conundrum, I propose we look in a structured manner at the obstacles to action and the mechanisms that make it difficult for us to actually “save the world” when we need to. Creating a resource for those who seek to solve such complicated problems might be useful in helping us design initiatives that might actually help.**

To me, most books on environmental issues miss the point. Or, they never get to the point. The whole book is typically dedicated to describing how bad things are, and imparting basic knowledge. Again the assumption is that if we only knew, or truly understood, we would do something about it. How we could do something about it is, at best, left to a hand-waving argument in the last few pages of the final chapter. How we could get to this point, where we actually *could* take action, or what that would take, is never asked. You could read an infinite number of such books, and still come out of it without any operational knowledge on how to go about actually doing something.

Personally, I struggle with even the *organizing* of the writing of such a book, let alone saving the world... If, on the other hand, such a book has already been produced, please let me know, because I should very much like to read it.

Are you an expert in one of the relevant fields and interested in participating, or someone willing and able to help make **Can We Save The World?** the seminar series/book, happen—whether it be planning, fundraising, organizing, facilitating, brainstorming, providing a venue, publishing, publicity—please get in touch.

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