

Climate change is the fight of our lives – yet we can hardly bear to look at it

Naomi Klein – *The Guardian* - Wednesday 23 April 2014

We're products of an industrial project, a project linked to fossil fuels. But humans have changed before and can change again.

This is a story about bad timing. One of the most disturbing ways that climate change is already playing out is through what ecologists call "mismatch" or "mistiming." This is the process whereby warming causes animals to fall out of step with a critical food source, particularly at breeding times, when a failure to find enough food can lead to rapid population losses.

The migration patterns of many songbird species, for instance, have evolved over millennia so that eggs hatch precisely when food sources such as caterpillars are at their most abundant, providing parents with ample nourishment for their hungry young. But because spring now often arrives early, the caterpillars are hatching earlier too, which means that in some areas they are less plentiful when the chicks hatch, with a number of possible long-term impacts on survival.

Similarly, in West Greenland, caribou are arriving at their calving grounds only to find themselves out of sync with the forage plants they have relied on for thousands of years, now growing earlier thanks to rising temperatures. That is leaving female caribou with less energy for lactation, reproduction and feeding their young, a mismatch that has been linked to sharp decreases in calf births and survival rates.

Scientists are studying cases of climate-related mistiming among dozens of species, from Arctic terns to pied flycatchers. But there is one important species they are missing – us. *Homo sapiens*. We too are suffering from a terrible case of climate-related mistiming, albeit in a cultural-historical, rather than a biological, sense. Our problem is that the climate crisis hatched in our laps at a moment in history when political and social conditions were uniquely hostile to a problem of this nature and magnitude – that moment being the tail end of the go-go 80s, the blast-off point for the crusade to spread deregulated capitalism around the world. Climate change is a collective problem demanding collective action the likes of which humanity has never actually accomplished. Yet it entered mainstream consciousness in the midst of an ideological war being waged on the very idea of the collective sphere.

When regulation became a dirty word

This deeply unfortunate mistiming has created all sorts of barriers to our ability to respond effectively to this crisis. It has meant that corporate power was ascendant at the very moment when we needed to exert unprecedented controls over corporate behaviour in order to protect life on Earth. It has meant that regulation was a dirty word just when we needed those powers most. It has meant that we are ruled by a class of politicians who know only how to dismantle and starve public institutions just when they most need to be fortified and reimagined. And it has meant that we are

saddled with an apparatus of "free trade" deals that tie the hands of policymakers just when they need maximum flexibility to achieve a massive energy transition.

Confronting these various structural barriers to the next economy is the critical work of any serious climate movement. But it's not the only task at hand. We also have to confront how the mismatch between climate change and market domination has created barriers within our very selves, making it harder to look at this most pressing of humanitarian crises with anything more than furtive, terrified glances. Because of the way our daily lives have been altered by both market and technological triumphalism, we lack many of the observational tools necessary to convince ourselves that climate change is real – let alone the confidence to believe that a different way of living is possible.

And little wonder: just when we needed to gather, our public sphere was disintegrating; just when we needed to consume less, consumerism took over virtually every aspect of our lives; just when we needed to slow down and notice, we sped up; and just when we needed longer time horizons, we were able to see only the immediate present.

This is our climate change mismatch, and it affects not just our species but potentially every other species on the planet as well.

The good news is that, unlike reindeer and songbirds, we humans are blessed with the capacity for advanced reasoning and therefore the ability to adapt more deliberately – to change old patterns of behaviour with remarkable speed. If the ideas that rule our culture are stopping us from saving ourselves, then it is within our power to change those ideas. But before that can happen, we first need to understand the nature of our personal climate mismatch.

Being consumers is all we know

Climate change demands that we consume less, but being consumers is all we know. Climate change is not a problem that can be solved simply by changing what we buy – a hybrid instead of an SUV, some carbon offsets when we get on a plane. At its core, it is a crisis born of overconsumption by the comparatively wealthy, which means the world's most manic consumers are going to have to consume less.

The problem is not "human nature," as we are so often told. We weren't born having to shop this much, and we have, in our recent past, been just as happy (in many cases happier) consuming far less. The problem is the inflated role that consumption has come to play in our particular era.

Late capitalism teaches us to create ourselves through our consumer choices: shopping is how we form our identities, find community and express ourselves. Thus, telling people that they can't shop as much as they want to because the planet's support systems are overburdened can be understood as a kind of attack, akin to telling them that they cannot truly be themselves. This is likely why, of the original "three Rs" – reduce, reuse, recycle – only the third has ever gotten any traction, since it allows us to keep on shopping as long as we put the refuse in the right box. The other two, which require that we consume less, were pretty much dead on arrival.

Climate change is slow, and we are fast. When you are racing through a rural landscape on a bullet train, it looks as if everything you are passing is standing still: people, tractors, cars on country roads.

They aren't, of course. They are moving, but at a speed so slow compared with the train that they appear static.

So it is with climate change. Our culture, powered by fossil fuels, is that bullet train, hurtling forward toward the next quarterly report, the next election cycle, the next bit of diversion or piece of personal validation via our smartphones and tablets. Our changing climate is like the landscape out the window: from our racy vantage point it can appear static, but it is moving, its slow progress measured in receding ice sheets, swelling waters and incremental temperature rises. If left unchecked, climate change will most certainly speed up enough to capture our fractured attention – island nations wiped off the map, and city-drowning superstorms, tend to do that. But by then, it may be too late for our actions to make a difference, because the era of tipping points will likely have begun.

The importance of the intensely local

Climate change is place-based, and we are everywhere at once. The problem is not just that we are moving too quickly. It is also that the terrain on which the changes are taking place is intensely local: an early blooming of a particular flower, an unusually thin layer of ice on a lake, the late arrival of a migratory bird. Noticing those kinds of subtle changes requires an intimate connection to a specific ecosystem. That kind of communion happens only when we know a place deeply, not just as scenery but also as sustenance, and when local knowledge is passed on with a sense of sacred trust from one generation to the next.

But that is increasingly rare in the urbanised, industrialised world. We tend to abandon our homes lightly – for a new job, a new school, a new love. And as we do so, we are severed from whatever knowledge of place we managed to accumulate at the previous stop, as well as from the knowledge amassed by our ancestors (who, at least in my case, migrated repeatedly themselves).

Even for those of us who manage to stay put, our daily existence can be disconnected from the physical places where we live. Shielded from the elements as we are in our climate-controlled homes, workplaces and cars, the changes unfolding in the natural world easily pass us by. We might have no idea that a historic drought is destroying the crops on the farms that surround our urban homes, since the supermarkets still display miniature mountains of imported produce, with more coming in by truck all day. It takes something huge – like a hurricane that passes all previous high-water marks, or a flood destroying thousands of homes – for us to notice that something is truly amiss. And even then we have trouble holding on to that knowledge for long, since we are quickly ushered along to the next crisis before these truths have a chance to sink in.

Climate change, meanwhile, is busily adding to the ranks of the rootless every day, as natural disasters, failed crops, starving livestock and climate-fuelled ethnic conflicts force yet more people to leave their ancestral homes. And with every human migration, more crucial connections to specific places are lost, leaving yet fewer people to listen closely to the land.

How we made the air our sewer

Climate pollutants are invisible, and we have stopped believing in what we cannot see. When [BP's Macondo well ruptured in 2010](#), releasing torrents of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, one of the things

we heard from company chief executive Tony Hayward was that "the Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume." The statement was widely ridiculed at the time, and rightly so, but Hayward was merely voicing one of our culture's most cherished beliefs: that what we can't see won't hurt us and, indeed, barely exists.

So much of our economy relies on the assumption that there is always an "away" into which we can throw our waste. There's the away where our garbage goes when it is taken from the curb, and the away where our waste goes when it is flushed down the drain. There's the away where the minerals and metals that make up our goods are extracted, and the away where those raw materials are turned into finished products. But the lesson of the BP spill, in the words of ecological theorist Timothy Morton, is that ours is "a world in which there is no 'away.'"

When I published [No Logo](#) a decade and a half ago, readers were shocked to learn of the abusive conditions under which their clothing and gadgets were manufactured. But we have since learned to live with it – not to condone it, exactly, but to be in a state of constant forgetfulness. Ours is an economy of ghosts, of deliberate blindness.

Air is the ultimate unseen, and the greenhouse gases that warm it are our most elusive ghosts. Philosopher David Abram points out that for most of human history, it was precisely this unseen quality that gave the air its power and commanded our respect. "Called Sila, the wind-mind of the world, by the Inuit; Nilch'i, or Holy Wind, by the Navajo; Ruach, or rushing-spirit, by the ancient Hebrews," the atmosphere was "the most mysterious and sacred dimension of life."

But in our time "we rarely acknowledge the atmosphere as it swirls between two persons." Having forgotten the air, Abram writes, we have made it our sewer, "the perfect dump site for the unwanted byproducts of our industries ... Even the most opaque, acrid smoke billowing out of the pipes will dissipate and disperse, always and ultimately dissolving into the invisible. It's gone. Out of sight, out of mind."

The timeframes that escape us

Another part of what makes climate change so very difficult for us to grasp is that ours is a culture of the perpetual present, one that deliberately severs itself from the past that created us as well as the future we are shaping with our actions. Climate change is about how what we did generations in the past will inescapably affect not just the present, but generations in the future. These timeframes are a language that has become foreign to most of us.

This is not about passing individual judgment, nor about berating ourselves for our shallowness or rootlessness. Rather, it is about recognising that we are products of an industrial project, one intimately and historically linked to fossil fuels.

And just as we have changed before, we can change again. After listening to the great farmer-poet [Wendell Berry](#) deliver a lecture on how we each have a duty to love our "homeplace" more than any other, I asked him if he had any advice for rootless people like me and my friends, who live in our computers and always seem to be shopping from home. "*Stop somewhere,*" he replied. "*And begin the thousand-year-long process of knowing that place.*"