

## **A desirable future for Earth in 2050, and desirable pathways to reach that future.**

Personal vision statement for Planet2050 workshop, Lund, Sweden. October 26-31<sup>st</sup>

*Stefan Kaufman, Social Research Officer, EPA Victoria, Australia. PhD Student, Human Ecology Program, Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University, Canberra.*

In 2050, if I'm still alive, I'll be 72. Looking ahead, a desirable future means a life of well being, meaning and happiness that enriches others lives similarly. I'd like to be surrounded by my friends and family, and still be part of things going on around me. I note writing this that I take health, food and shelter for granted, and with them an economic and biophysical environment capable of sustaining all these things. No doubt most other people on Earth would want all this, and I want them to have it also.

This is a simple vision we should not lose sight of. It is also a consciously human-centric one, for reasons I will not go into here. It only gets complex when these simple, and dare I say, universal, desires are expressed ways that mean one group of peoples' achieving this prevents others from doing the same.

My lifestyle, and that of my community, precludes anyone on Earth having such a future. Our minority world lifestyles are directly dependent on unsustainable material and energy consumption that threatens the otherwise self-regulating, complex life support systems of this planet. The provision of this hyper-consumption is complicit in the economic, political and cultural oppression of the majority of my fellow human beings. Not withstanding global conspiracy theories, no one really wanted it this way, but we have a created a system where I can live a perfectly good life by the standards of my immediate community, which is unsustainable and deeply unethical on the global scale. Every citizen of the minority first world is more or less in the same bind, not withstanding significant inequalities within our countries.

At minimum, we must pull back from dangerous climate change tipping points (aka Hansen and colleagues). We are seriously impacting on the global environment, but it is both more and less than an Anthropocene. Different parts of the human species are impacting on the planet in very different, but interrelated ways.

One key pathway to a desirable future will be remedying inequality. If all people on planet earth in 2050 are to achieve my simple vision, communities like my own must, disentangle the links between energy and material consumption, pollution and quality of life. We consume too much, and as others have noted, we need to learn to appreciate 'sufficiency' and 'quality' over abundance and quantity. Perverse outcomes of the status quo include such things as obesity epidemics and famine on the same planet.

Majority world communities must develop their human potential, particularly through women's empowerment and education, in order to reach the point where population is stabilised and social capacity is realised. 'Westernisation' won't work. Current development relationships do seem to grow economies in the majority world (excepting much of Africa), but also increase inequality within populations with negative social and environmental consequences. Eventually, they are thus not even

economically sustainable. That the majority world can and should develop 'just like western countries' while the same guard their privilege is unsupported by the history of last 50 years.

Undoubtedly, my future vision means continuing environmental impacts. I do not believe we can have advanced, humane global civilisation over the next few hundred years and maintain wilderness on this planet. Precluding global disaster or genocide, population and consumption trajectories seem to rule out any hope other than, as Tim Flannery puts it, humanity deliberately taking the role of the mind of Gaia (the complex adaptive biophysical system emerging from, and sustaining, life on this planet). Perhaps in hundreds of years, our population levels and consumption will reach a point where wilderness will return, but it will be a different form to what remains today. We currently have an unbalanced, negative anthropocene. To achieve a desirable future, we need to reach a sustainable, positive anthropocene.

Another critical pathway will be reconnecting the social rationality of lifestyles on the local scale to their global implications and impacts. In the past, continuous cultures living intimately with local ecosystems over long periods of time have achieved parity between social norms, material arrangements and the ecological sustainability of their lifestyles. This sounds nice, but it should be noted that this also meant limited populations, shorter life spans, and generally smaller horizons in all parts of life (including but not limited to gender roles, social mobility, cultural diversity and so on).

The (very short) history of civilisation is the escape of the energy and material limits of local ecosystems through social innovation and technology, and the subsequent diversification and atomisation of social life. In this scenario, human beings with essentially the same drives and needs are now embedded in a complex socio-technological infrastructure that substitutes the interpersonal and communal with consumption. Impacts are simultaneously amplified and displaced in time and space. We have never been so powerful as now, nor so insulated from the impacts of that power on other people and the biosphere. For all that, climate change amongst other global feedbacks, presents us with the challenge of re-calibrating our participation in this expanded system. We will know we have succeeded when what is personally and locally rational is collectively and globally rational also.