

# World Report 2050: Unstable, Unmanageable, and Unliveable

Michael Livingstone

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**Introduction**

Global environmental politics between 2010 and 2050 were characterized by the inability of the environmental movement to generate institutional reform. By 2010, a few scattered voices in and around the environmental movement were beginning to argue that effective responses to threats to the global environment would have to centre on a strong challenge to consumer capitalism. This was due to the growing body of evidence that human consumption was causing major environmental damage.

Unfortunately, politicians and the private sector were not interested in losing votes or profits, respectively. Therefore, environmental issues were never able to take priority over economic growth, and sustainable consumption was not prioritized. As neo-liberal free-market ideology dominated the first half of the century, consumerism was encouraged and celebrated.

The best way to detail the history of global environmental politics between 2010 and 2050 is to analyze the relationships between the environment and environmentalism, consumerism and consumption, the global economy and the private sector, and governments and institutions. In this way, it is possible to show that the world of 2050 has been shaped by political apathy, greed, and the failure of democratic governance.

### **The Environment and Environmentalism**

The early part of the century heard calls from environmentalists, International Governmental Organizations (IGOs), and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that the future of the natural world was at tipping point. In 2002, the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity agreed to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction to the rate of biodiversity loss at global, regional, and national levels. This target was not achieved.<sup>1</sup> In 2005, humanity's ecological footprint exceeded the earth's total biocapacity by 30%,<sup>2</sup> and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that annual carbon emissions would more than double by 2050.<sup>3</sup> The resulting global warming intensified the hydrologic cycle, producing greater floods and greater droughts.<sup>4</sup>

In December 2009, the heads of state were supposed to sign the successor treaty to the Kyoto Accord in Copenhagen. This treaty would have gone into effect at the last possible moment to heed the

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<sup>1</sup> Loh, Jonathan, ed. For a Living Planet: 2010 and Beyond. Gland, Switzerland: WWF International, 2008. Pg 1.

<sup>2</sup> Hails, Chris, ed. WWF Living Planet Report 2008. Gland, Switzerland: WWF International, 2008. Pg 14.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pg 22.

<sup>4</sup> Hansen, James. "Tipping Point: Perspective of a Climatologist." State of the Wild 2008. Pg 9.

most basic limits on atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, the Copenhagen treaty was not signed by the United States, who had still not signed the Kyoto Protocol as of August, 2009.<sup>6</sup>

While the environmental movement focused on climate change from carbon emissions as its major rallying cry, other issues were causing ecological damage as well. By 2008, the ethanol-from-corn boom had diverted 100 million tons of grain from human diets,<sup>7</sup> and by 2010 just three crops provided humanity with 50% of its food.<sup>8</sup> An estimated 60% of the world's ecosystems had been degraded by 2010,<sup>9</sup> and unsustainable management schemes persisted in the fishing industry so that by 2050 fish stocks had declined by more than 90% compared to 2010 levels.<sup>10</sup>

Still, by 2010, environmentalism was not able to gain enough social acceptance, economic backing, or political recognition to have any substantial impact on the catastrophic ecological changes occurring throughout the world. The advanced industrialized countries of the west continued to promote neo-liberal market dynamics,<sup>11</sup> China opened two new coal-fuelled power-plants every week,<sup>12</sup> and India pioneered the \$2,500 car.<sup>13</sup> The major problem for the environmental movement was not its inability to promote awareness; it was its inability to confront consumption.

### **Consumerism and Consumption**

Environmentalists' early 21<sup>st</sup> century hopes for transformation did not pan out, largely due to consumerism and consumption. Neo-liberalism promoted consumerism as a democratic right. Sadly, consumerism was not an ideology conducive to promoting human well-being because it enabled a rapacious capitalist system.<sup>14</sup> Consumerism promoted consumption, and people used consumption practices to show their allegiance to certain social groups and to distinguish themselves from others.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>5</sup>McKibben, Bill. "It Isn't Morning in America Anymore - It's Dusk on Planet Earth." May 12, 2008. Pg 4. <[www.alternet.org/module/printversion/85080](http://www.alternet.org/module/printversion/85080)>

<sup>6</sup> Kyoto Protocol Status of Ratification, August 26, 2009. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. <[http://unfccc.int/files/kyoto\\_protocol/status\\_of\\_ratification/application/pdf/kp\\_ratification\\_20090826corr.pdf](http://unfccc.int/files/kyoto_protocol/status_of_ratification/application/pdf/kp_ratification_20090826corr.pdf)> Retrieved September 19, 2009.

<sup>7</sup>Davis, Mike. "The Era of Catastrophe? Geologists Name New Era After Human Influence on the Planet." August 11, 2008. Pg. 4. <<http://www.alternet.org/environment/89940/>>

<sup>8</sup> Loh, ed., pg 10.

<sup>9</sup>Jackson, Tim. "Prosperity Without Growth? The Transition to a Sustainable Economy." Sustainable Development Commission. UK: 2009. Pg 6.

<sup>10</sup> Hails, ed., pg 22.

<sup>11</sup> Soper, Kate. "Paper from Kate Soper to Meeting on Living well (within limits) - exploring the relationship between growth and wellbeing." Sustainable Development Commission. Pg 4.

<sup>12</sup> Davis, pg 3.

<sup>13</sup> McKibben, pg. 3

<sup>14</sup>Schor, Juliet (an interview by Jo Littler), "Tackling Turbo Consumption." Cultural Studies 22 (5) September 2008: 588-98. Pg 51.

<sup>15</sup>Jackson, Tim. "The Challenge of Sustainable Lifestyles." State of the World 2008. Pg 49.

By 2004 in Europe and North America, 12% of the global population accounted for 60% of consumer spending.<sup>16</sup>

By 2010, the developing world was showing economic progress based on the free-market principles championed by developed countries. By 2020, China, India, Russia, and Brazil were fully industrialized and were using their newfound wealth to encourage a growing consumer class to buy and use as much as possible. As Allen Hammond predicted, by 2050

"Economic expansion...brought rapidly worsening pollution to much of industrializing Asia and Latin America as sprawling new factories spewed wastes into the environment. Ever larger numbers of cars and trucks choked urban streets...but lack of money, political will, and often the technical ability to enforce environmental laws meant that governments in most newly industrializing countries did little to rein in pollution."<sup>17</sup>

Why did things turn out this way? Why did we not see evolution towards a post-growth economy – an economy premised on sustainable levels of consumption? What obstacles prevented that transformation? Why were those advocating transformation not able to overcome these obstacles? The answer to these questions requires a look at the relationship between the global economy and the private sector.

### **The Globalized Economy and the Private Sector**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the infrastructure of consumption was a matrix of social, material, political and economic pressures that effectively compelled people into making consumption-intensive choices in their daily lives.<sup>18</sup> The real motor of consumer society was not the insatiable desire of consumers, but the relentless drive of capital to ratchet up the commodification of people's lives by continually pressuring them into profit-yielding behaviours.<sup>19</sup> Technological innovation and the self-serving need of people to have the latest gadgets and other material items was praised as a way for people to make their lives easier and better, but this novelty was in fact the structural reliance of business and the economy on growing consumption.<sup>20</sup> Analysis of the global economy of 2010 therefore reveals several important structural problems that worsened with time. The primary problem was the neo-liberal ideology of free markets, small government, appeasement of corporations, and speculation of monetary instruments and private property.

<sup>16</sup> Soron, Dennis. "Death by Consumption." *Labour/Le Travail* (Spring 2005). Pg 5.

<sup>17</sup> Hammond, Allen. *Which World? Scenarios for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. 1998. Pg 39.

<sup>18</sup> Soron, pg 6.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pg 13.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson, Tim. "The Challenge of Sustainable Lifestyles." *State of the World 2008*. Pg 57.

Faith in the ability of the market to correct itself proved more and more problematic by 2020. China's investments in foreign wealth funds and off-shore developments began to pay off and allowed their own economy to flourish. By 2025, the Euro, not the over-valued US dollar, was the standard reserve currency of world trade, and regional currencies similar to the Euro began to take hold in South America and Asia. Hong Kong, London, and Tokyo surpassed New York as the financial centres of the world, and America began turning inward, trying to isolate itself from the global economy.

Africa's collapse was spectacular; despite efforts at reform, the continent's rapidly rising populations, falling incomes, and corrupt governments proved overwhelming.<sup>21</sup> The few stable countries on the African continent were overwhelmed by economic immigrants, and massive foreign aid was injected into South Africa and Nigeria to keep those countries afloat.

The global economy began to contract by 2030, when the convergent impacts of climate change, peak oil, peak water, and an additional 1.5 billion people on the planet began to seriously throttle growth<sup>22</sup> and cause irreparable damage to the environment.

The recession of the 2030s and 2040s was much worse than the great depression of the 1930s. Large numbers of people starved to death, due not only to dwindling food supplies, but also the lack of available paid work. Pandemic illnesses killed millions more. Large numbers of economic and environmental refugees poured into developed countries, but they were not integrated into society; instead they became poor, homeless, and lived on the fringes of society.

### **Government and Institutions**

The failure of the globalized economy cannot be blamed entirely on the private sector's profit motivations. Governments and institutions took less and less interest in protecting their citizens, as competition and market supremacy became the norm. The profit interests of corporations held enormous political power with governments, and regulations were eased, corporate taxes were lowered, and good-paying government jobs began to vanish as more and more services formerly provided by the state came under the control of the private sector. This led to a shrinking middle class, a richer and more powerful elite class, and a deeply impoverished and marginalized lower class.

Stimulating economic growth through ever increasing rates of private consumption thus became the supreme goal of state economic policy in the western world by 2010.<sup>23</sup> Personal taxes were increased

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<sup>21</sup> Hammond, pg 41.

<sup>22</sup> Davis , pg 7.

<sup>23</sup> Soron, pg 6.

and corporate taxes became almost non-existent. Jobs were "created" through infrastructure and commercial development projects, which allowed service-sector jobs to rise in number; however, as these were not well-paying jobs, the middle-class began to shrink. By 2020, government jobs began to vanish and were contracted out, and the quality of social services deteriorated substantially. Only the wealthy could now afford quality health care and progressive educations. The lower class of the electorate became politically apathetic, and the elite class did an excellent job of using corporate donations to mobilize their voters. Thus, neo-liberal ideology flourished, and the environment, consumption, and the problems of society in general all took a back seat to the importance of the expanding global market.

Peak oil and peak water hit in 2030, and the depression of the 2030s and 2040s was severe. Governments, with their now tiny bureaucracies, were able to do little to reverse the economic recession. As the state was now receiving very little corporate tax revenue, there was little money to spend on new infrastructure projects to stimulate economic recovery. Corporations were content to downsize and save their bottom line, leaving many more out of work. By 2050, the world was a shell of its former self, with ineffective governments, massive unemployment, a failure of globalized markets, and environmental catastrophe causing instability and anarchic conditions around the world.<sup>24</sup>

### **Conclusion: What Went Wrong?**

Clearly, the history of global environmental politics between 2010 and 2050 was defined by the relationships between the environment and environmentalism, consumerism and consumption, the global economy and the private sector, and governments and institutions. The world of 2050 has been shaped by political apathy, greed, and the failure of democratic governance.

The world of 2050 is much different from the world of 2010. Globalization's negative impacts worsened, the environment deteriorated, and democratic governance became corrupted by powerful corporate interests. The social deterioration that occurred was also catastrophic; people lost their jobs, lost their political wills, and lost their right to be free. Government became so small that it could do little to support the growing numbers of unemployed, and corporations became so big that they no longer needed government's support; the private sector essentially had control of the world.

It is interesting to look back to the early part of the 21st century when a group of academics, scientists, and other experts were warning governments to act in ways that would make consumption more sustainable, ecological damage less dangerous, and corporations less powerful. Tim Jackson, who was the Economics Commissioner for the UK Sustainable Development Commission in the early part of the

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<sup>24</sup>Allen Hammond's 'Fortress World' scenario provides similar perspectives.

century, explained that governments needed to take a leadership role to prevent unsustainable consumption from destroying the ecological capacity of the planet. This could be done, he argued, by developing policies and regulations to encourage efficiency and sustainability for businesses and consumers.<sup>25</sup> As Jackson stated in 2009,

"As long as macro-economic stability depends on economic growth, government will have an incentive to support social structures that undermine commitment and reinforce materialistic, novelty-seeking individualism."<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, consumption levels continued to rise higher not only across the developed world, but in developing countries as well. This depleted the earth's natural resources to almost nothing, and the failure of governments and corporations to develop affordable and sustainable energy alternatives<sup>27</sup> such as solar power, wind power, electric automobiles, and hydro-electric power meant that corn was used for fuel instead of food - for those few who could still afford automobiles, that is.

So, looking back, it is easy to see what went wrong. Governments avoided environmental issues because they feared it would cost them votes. Corporations avoided environmental issues because they feared it would cost them profits. And citizens avoided environmental issues because they feared it would take away from them their right to consume as much as they wanted. Sadly, none of these groups took action, and the planet became increasingly unstable, unmanageable, and unliveable.

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<sup>25</sup>Jackson, Tim. "The Challenge of Sustainable Lifestyles." State of the World 2008. Pg 58.

<sup>26</sup>Jackson, Tim. "Prosperity Without Growth? The Transition to a Sustainable Economy." Sustainable Development Commission.

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<sup>27</sup>Fuchs, Doris A. and Lorek, Sylvia. "Sustainable Consumption Governance: A History of Promises and Failures."

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