

The Next Green Revolution

How technology is leading environmentalism out of the anti-business, anti-consumer wilderness.

By Alex Nikolai Steffen

For decades, environmentalists have warned of a coming climate crisis. Their alarms went unheeded, and last year we reaped an early harvest: a singularly ferocious hurricane season, record snowfall in New England, the worst-ever wildfires in Alaska, arctic glaciers at their lowest ebb in millennia, catastrophic drought in Brazil, devastating floods in India - portents of global warming's destructive potential.

Green-minded activists failed to move the broader public not because they were wrong about the problems, but because the solutions they offered were unappealing to most people. They called for tightening belts and curbing appetites, turning down the thermostat and living lower on the food chain. They rejected technology, business, and prosperity in favor of returning to a simpler way of life. No wonder the movement got so little traction. Asking people in the world's wealthiest, most advanced societies to turn their backs on the very forces that drove such abundance is naive at best.

With climate change hard upon us, a new green movement is taking shape, one that embraces environmentalism's concerns but rejects its worn-out answers. Technology can be a font of endlessly creative solutions. Business can be a vehicle for change. Prosperity can help us build the kind of world we want. Scientific exploration, innovative design, and cultural evolution are the most powerful tools we have. Entrepreneurial zeal and market forces, guided by sustainable policies, can propel the world into a bright green future.

Americans trash the planet not because we're evil, but because the industrial systems we've devised leave no other choice. Our ranch houses and high-rises, factories and farms, freeways and power plants were conceived before we had a clue how the planet works. They're primitive inventions designed by people who didn't fully grasp the consequences of their actions.

Consider the unmitigated ecological disaster that is the automobile. Every time you turn on the ignition, you're enmeshed in a system whose known outcomes include a polluted atmosphere, oil-slicked seas, and desert wars. As comprehension of the stakes has grown, though, a market has emerged for a more sensible alternative. Today you can drive a Toyota Prius that burns far less gasoline than a conventional car. Tomorrow we might see vehicles that consume no fossil fuels and emit no greenhouse gases. Combine cars like that with smarter urban growth and we're well on our way to sustainable transportation.

You don't change the world by hiding in the woods, wearing a hair shirt, or buying indulgences in the form of save the earth bumper stickers. You do it by articulating a vision for the future and pursuing it with all the ingenuity humanity can muster. Indeed, being green at the start of the 21st century requires a wholehearted commitment to upgrading civilization. Four key principles can guide the way:

Renewable energy is plentiful energy. Burning fossil fuels is a filthy habit, and the supply won't last forever. Fortunately, a growing number of renewable alternatives promise clean, inexhaustible power: wind turbines, solar arrays, wave-power flotillas, small hydroelectric generators, geothermal systems, even bioengineered algae that turn waste into hydrogen. The challenge is to scale up these technologies to deliver power in industrial quantities - exactly the kind of challenge brilliant businesspeople love.

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Efficiency creates value. The number one US industrial product is waste. Waste is worse than stupid; it's costly, which is why we're seeing businesspeople in every sector getting a jump on the competition by consuming less water, power, and materials. What's true for industry is true at home, too: Think well-insulated houses full of natural light, cars that sip instead of guzzle, appliances that pay for themselves in energy savings.

Cities beat suburbs. Manhattanites use less energy than most people in North America. Sprawl eats land and snarls traffic. Building homes close together is a more efficient use of space and infrastructure. It also encourages walking, promotes public transit, and fosters community.

Quality is wealth. More is not better. Better is better. You don't need a bigger house; you need a different floor plan. You don't need more stuff; you need stuff you'll actually use. Ecofriendly designs and nontoxic materials already exist, and there's plenty of room for innovation. You may pay more for things like long-lasting, energy-efficient LED lightbulbs, but they'll save real money over the long term.

Redesigning civilization along these lines would bring a quality of life few of us can imagine. That's because a fully functioning ecology is tantamount to tangible wealth. Clean air and water, a diversity of animal and plant species, soil and mineral resources, and predictable weather are annuities that will pay dividends for as long as the human race survives - and may even extend our stay on Earth.

It may seem impossibly far away, but on days when the smog blows off, you can already see it: a society built on radically green design, sustainable energy, and closed-loop cities; a civilization afloat on a cloud of efficient, nontoxic, recyclable technology. That's a future we can live with.

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