

Not the Usual Story.

The Story of Stuff is an animated film that explains the origins and the end-result of the products that we consume. In simple language and presentation, the film makes a powerful critique of today's alarming rate of consumption especially in the North and offers a hopeful alternative that places sustainability, equity and happiness at the core of our lives. The film has generated seven million views since it was released in 2007.

Annie Leonard communicates more of her vision for the very successful The Story of Stuff and its upcoming sequel. She shows us why we cannot afford not to be hopeful for our one and only planet.

More from the Storyteller

An interview with Annie Leonard

by Nina Somera

Women in Action (WIA): *What influenced you to become an environmentalist?*

Annie Leonard (AL): When I was younger, I thought that being an environmentalist was one among many options. Now, when the environment all around us – even within us – is in crisis, I see that it is not a career nor a hobby. It is part of being awake in the world today. If you like to breathe, drink water, look into the eyes of a friend – then it is essential to be an environmentalist.

There were many influences which inspired me on this path. I grew up in the United States' (US) beautiful Pacific Northwest and was fortunate to spend many days in the Cascade Mountains and along the Pacific coasts so I got to feel that amazing humbling feeling of being among the tall trees or crashing waves. At home, my mother taught me a sense of frugality, of appreciation for the things we had and distaste for waste. She also nurtured in me a strong sense of justice, of right and wrong.

In high school, I became obsessed with both the lake where I lived and the fish tanks I kept in my home. I learned about the importance

of water quality and how easily something could throw it off, with disastrous results.

Finally, I went to university in New York City, where the glaring waste of resources as well as whole neighbourhoods shocked me. I had never seen such huge amounts of stuff and entire neighbourhoods that had just been written off as having no value. So it was putting it all together – the environmental, social, health and justice issues - that made me an environmentalist.

WIA: *In your stint as an environmentalist, what were the most glaring issues that struck you and why?*

AL: My work has focused on the hidden impacts of all our stuff. I have visited hundreds of factories where our stuff is made and dumps where our stuff is dumped all over the world.

I guess the biggest thing that has struck me in this work is the interconnectedness of these issues. The deeper one looks into any one problem – whether it is pollution or garbage or climate chaos or inequality – the more we see that they are all so

interconnected. It is impossible to really solve any one of these problems without solving them all because they all stem from the same economic system and mindset.

Another thing that has struck me is how well so many of the negative impacts of current systems of production and consumption are hidden from those in power. In most of the US, for example, it would be really easy to go about our days and not know that communities all over the world are losing the resource base on which they depend, that oceans are being fished dry or that aquifers are drying up. It is easy to not see the toxic chemicals that are so pervasive that they are now found in the bodies of every human being on the planet, even new born infants.

With each passing month, it is getting harder and harder to hide these negative impacts. But there are vast areas of the world, especially in the industrialised North, where people can continue to think of climate disaster as some distant threat. If one does not go outside our resource intensive comfort zone, it is really easy to deny or ignore, or honestly not even

The Final Script

I am so glad that the world is *finally* getting together to stop climate change. When I first heard that our leaders were meeting to talk about solutions, I breathed a huge sigh of relief. Didn't you?

Then I said, wait a minute. What exactly are they planning to do about this problem? So I looked into it. And I gotta tell you, not all the solutions they're working on are what I'd call solutions. In fact, the leading solution, known as cap and trade or emissions trading, is actually a huge *problem*.

Now I know this is the last thing you want to hear, but the future of our PLANET is at stake, so we gotta take the time to understand what's going on here.

Okay, meet the guys at the heart of this so-called solution. They include the guys from Enron who designed energy trading, and the Wall Street financiers like Goldman Sachs who gave us the subprime mortgage crisis.

Their job is to develop brand new markets. They stake their claims and then when everyone and their grandmother wants in, they make off with huge amounts of money as the market becomes a giant bubble and bursts.

Well their latest bubble just burst and now they got a new idea for a market – trading carbon pollution. They're about to develop a new \$3 trillion bubble, but when this one bursts, it won't just take down our stock portfolios, it could take down *everything!*

So how does cap and trade work?

Well, pretty much all serious scientists agree that we need to reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere to 350 ppm if we want to avoid climate disaster. In the US, that means reducing our emissions by 80% – maybe even more – by 2050. 80%!

THE STORY OF STUFF PROJECT PRESENTS
THE STORY OF
CAP & TRADE
WHY YOU CAN'T SOLVE A PROBLEM
WITH THE THINKING THAT CREATED IT

I sought to intersperse facts with stories, to inform people while also connecting to experiences people have had. I wanted to reach people in both their heads and their hearts. Communicating and building relationships and strengthening our communities of resistance and organising are what will set us free, not facts alone.

realise, that our planet's ecological systems are in serious danger. And that worries me because the time to take action is now.

WIA: *How would you describe the impact of these issues on women?*

AL: Women are disproportionately impacted by environmental damage in many ways, starting on a very personal level. Our health and our ability to have healthy children are impacted by the constant barrage of toxic chemicals we face daily in the environment,

at our workplace and even in our consumer products. For example, around the world, women are using personal care products such as shampoo, cosmetics and sunscreen which contain neurotoxins, carcinogens and reproductive toxins. Why are reproductive toxins allowed in the chemicals which we apply on our bodies?

All women carry some level of toxic chemicals in our bodies, from our food, our air, water and the products we bring into our homes, workplaces and schools. We pass these on to our children when pregnant and while breastfeeding (Note: **breast is still best!** Keep breastfeeding and demand an end to persistent organic pollutants that build up in human milk!).

The system that allows women's bodies to be disproportionately impacted by toxic chemicals is also the same as that which allows business decisions to trump environmental concerns in current climate negotiations. In both cases, and in countless others, the goals of protecting women's health, promoting sustainability and ensuring equity are all trampled by the goal of

Now the problem is that most of our global economy runs on burning fossil fuels, which releases carbon: The factories that make all our stuff, the ships and trucks that carry it around the world, our cars and buildings and appliances, and just about everything.

So, how are we gonna reduce carbon 80% and not go back to living like *Little House on the Prairie*?

Well, these Cap and Trade guys are saying that a new carbon stock market is the best way to get it done.

The first step would be getting governments around the world to agree to a yearly limit on carbon emissions. That's the "cap." I think that part's great.

So how do they want to ensure that carbon emissions stay under the cap? Well, governments would distribute a certain amount of permits to pollute. Every year there would be fewer and fewer permits as we follow the cap to our goal.

Innovative companies will get on board building clean alternatives and getting more efficient. As permits get scarcer, they would also become more valuable, so naturally, companies who have extra will want to sell them to companies who need them.

That's where the trading comes in.

The logic is that as long as we stay under the cap, it doesn't matter who pollutes and who innovates. We'll meet our climate deadline, avoiding catastrophe. And oh yeah, these guys take their fee as they broker this multi-trillion dollar carbon racket, I mean market.

Save the planet, get rich, what's not to like? Some of my friends who really care about our future support cap and trade. A lot of environmental groups that I respect do too. They know it's not a perfect solution and they don't love the idea of turning our planet's future over to these guys, but they think that it is an important first step and that it's better than nothing. I'm not so sure.

And I'm not the only one. A growing movement of scientists, students, farmers, and forward thinking businesspeople are all saying, "wait a minute!"

In fact even the economists who invented the cap and trade system to deal with simpler problems like fertilizer pollution and sulfur dioxide, they say cap and trade will *never* work for climate change. Here's why I think they're right.

Madness from the Media. Mass media has been complicit in people's increasing consumption levels. Too often, it points out what people lack and therefore must buy. Citing that around 3,000 advertisements bombard people a day, Annie asserted that, "We see more advertisements in one year than people 50 years ago saw in a lifetime."

continued economic growth and corporate profit. Polluting businesses have shown us that they will trash everything from the global climate to our own wombs, if not stopped.

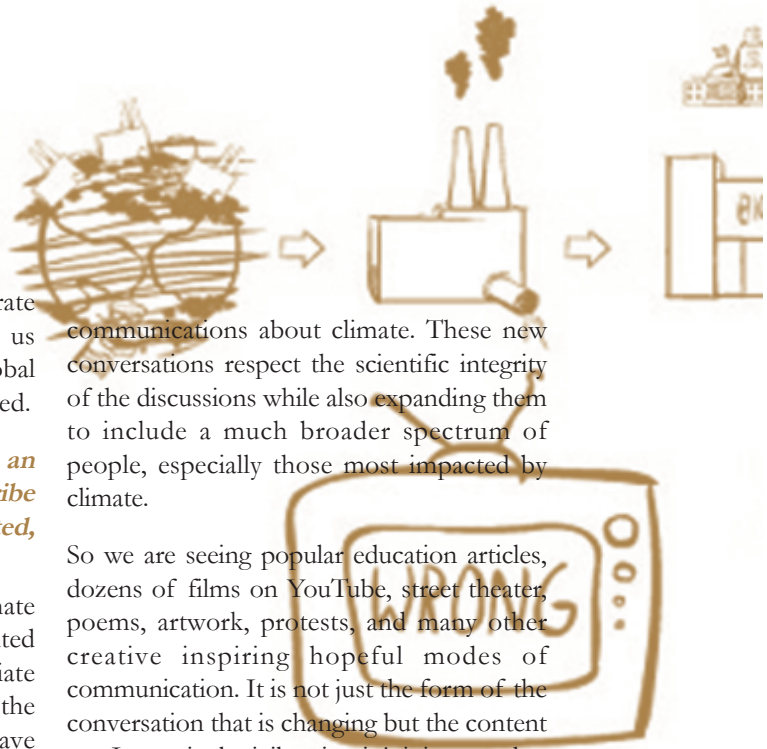
WIA: Based on your experience as an environmentalist, how would you describe the way climate change is communicated, generally?

AL: Historically, discussions about climate have been heavily scientific, policy-oriented and technical. While I certainly appreciate the technical aspect of the problem and the rigor that scientists around the world have applied to it, too often these discussions excluded those who are not well versed in the technical vocabulary nor present at the policy-decision making tables.

In recent years though, there has been a bursting open of this conversation. All over the world, people who have not been invited to those tables where decisions are made, are engaging in creative, inclusive, diverse

communications about climate. These new conversations respect the scientific integrity of the discussions while also expanding them to include a much broader spectrum of people, especially those most impacted by climate.

So we are seeing popular education articles, dozens of films on YouTube, street theater, poems, artwork, protests, and many other creative inspiring hopeful modes of communication. It is not just the form of the conversation that is changing but the content too. Increasingly civil society is joining together to demand that climate cannot be solved with market and technical solutions alone. Real solutions have to prioritise equity and sustainability. They have to address not just the levels of carbon in the atmosphere, but the economic, industrial and regulatory system that allowed climate change to happen. That is why we subtitled our new climate film: "Why we can't solve a problem with the same mindset that created it."



When it comes to any kind of financial scam, like subprime mortgages or Bernie Madoff's pyramid scheme, the devil is always in the details. And there are a lot of devils in the details of the cap and trade proposals on the table.

Devil number one is known as Free Permits, which is why some people call this system Cap and Giveaway. In this scheme, industrial polluters will get the vast majority of these valuable permits for free. *Free!*

The more they've been polluting, the more they get.

It's like we're thanking them for creating this problem in the first place.

In Europe they tried a Cap and Giveaway system. The price of permits bounced around like crazy, energy costs jumped for consumers, and guess what? Carbon emissions actually went up! The only part that did work was that the polluters made billions of dollars in extra profits. MIT economists say the same thing would likely happen here in the US.

Those billions come from OUR pockets. A real solution would put that money to work stopping climate change.

Instead of just giving permits away to polluters, we could sell them and use the money to:

- build a clean energy economy
- or give citizens a dividend to help pay for higher fuel prices while we transition to that clean energy economy
- or share it with those who are most harmed by climate change.

Some people call this paying our ecological debt.

Since we in the richest countries released the most carbon for centuries, and lived a pretty comfy lifestyle in the process, don't we have a responsibility to help those most harmed?

It's like we had a big party, didn't invite our neighbors and then stuck 'em with the clean up bill. It's just not cool.



WIA: *What made you choose film as a medium to communicate your message?*

AL: Actually, I did not start out choosing film. I started with a live presentation of *The Story of Stuff*, that was about an hour long and contained more details than we could fit in the film.

The response to the talk was very positive, but my ability to reach people was limited because I was only one person. So I joined up with Free Range Studios to brainstorm how we could capture this live talk in a film that we could make available for free on the internet. The people at Free Range are geniuses in communicating complex ideas and stories in accessible engaging ways. The result is the *Story of Stuff*.

WIA: *In filming *The Story of Stuff*, what were your considerations in terms of content and audience?*

AL: In making the *Story of Stuff*, we were not aiming at a broad audience, which makes its broad appeal all the more surprising and

encouraging. I wrote the script with my fellow activists in mind. My friends and I had been working on waste, forest, trade and related issues for 20 years. I was getting frustrated that even with all this great work and many specific victories, both the environment and social equity were getting worse.

I wanted to talk to people who already knew there are some problems, were probably even active on one piece of the system – be it forest protection or indigenous peoples rights or worker safety or recycling—to inspire us all to think more broadly, to move beyond being single issue campaigns and to think about the underlying system that is driving so much environmental and social destruction.

I never thought that the film would be popular among the broader public, even kids. So I was delighted to see that the message resonated with diverse communities all over the world. In a way, releasing the film was like taking the pulse of the conversation around the world and I found that millions

Did you know that in the next century, because of the changing climate, whole island nations could end up underwater and the UN says 9 out of 10 African farmers could lose their ability to grow food.

Now wouldn't a real solution benefit these people instead of just the polluters?

Devil number two is called Offsetting.

Offset permits are created when a company supposedly removes or reduces carbon. They then get a permit which can be sold to a polluter who wants permission to emit more carbon. In theory, one activity offsets the other.

The danger with offsets is it's very hard to guarantee that real *carbon* is being removed to create the permit. Yet these permits are worth real *money*.

This creates a very dangerous incentive to create false offsets – to cheat.

Now in some cases cheating isn't the end of the world, but in this case it is. And already there's a lot of cheating going on:

Like, in Indonesia, Sinar Mas corporation cut down indigenous forests, causing major ecological and cultural destruction. Then, they took the wasteland *they* created and planted palm oil trees. Guess what they can get for it? Yup, offset permits.

Carbon out? No. Carbon in? You bet.

Companies can even earn offsets for not doing anything at all.

Like, operators of a polluting factory can claim they were planning to expand 200% but reduced the plans to expand only 100%. For that meaningless claim, they get offset permits – permits that they can sell to someone else to make more pollution! That is so stupid!

The list of scams goes on and many of the worst ones happen in the so-called Third World where big business does whatever it wants, to whomever it wants. And with lax standards and regulations on offsets they can get permits for just about anything.



of people are ready for a deeper conversation about what is wrong and what we need to do to set things right.

WIA: *Why do you think the Story of Stuff became such a hit?*

AL: The success of *The Story of Stuff* was a big surprise! We were hoping for 50,000 views in the first year and we reached that number on the first day! To date, the site hosting the film has had about 8 million visits and we have distributed about 8,000 DVDS for viewing at places beyond the reach of high speed internet – including schools, faith-based groups, and civil society gatherings all around the world.

I think the film was well received because it gave the right message at the right moment. In many places, many people are increasingly realising that this toxics-contaminated and consumer-maniac lifestyle is just not working. We are working longer hours than any recent generation. We are exhausted. We are sick. We do not know our neighbours. And we have more stuff but fewer friends.

Many viewers wrote to us to say that *The Story of Stuff* explained a systemic problem that they instinctively knew, even if they did not know how to explain it. So I think the film resonated with so many people because it spoke to something that they already knew.

Also, the film offered a number of entry points into the conversation. Some people relate to the part about indigenous peoples not having rights, others relate to the panic about keeping up with the latest fashion, others to the problem of perpetually breaking electronics or toxics exposure at the workplace. Regardless of which door a viewer is most comfortable coming through, once inside, we can all have a conversation together about the deep problems with – and solutions to – our current industrial and economic model.

Another reason that I believe the film was well received is that it did not rely just on facts and figures to make the case. In *The Story of Stuff*, I sought to intersperse facts with stories, to inform people while also connecting to experiences people have had.

Torrent of Toxins.

There are over 100,000 synthetic chemicals that are used in the industrial production of consumer goods. Annie added that only few of them have been tested in terms of their impacts to human health. Among those who are directly affected are factory workers, especially women of reproductive age. It is likely that the chemicals that mothers absorb can be passed on to their children.

Now, are offsets a big part of current cap and trade proposals? Oh yeah. The latest cap and trade bill in the U.S. relies almost entirely on offsets to meet reduction targets for the next 20 years!

If the goal is to pump money into a bubble market, any kind of offsets are great. They require a lot of money changing hands, which means lots of opportunities for these guys to get some. And with these guys running the market, the top goal will be moving money, not saving the planet.

Devils one and two, Cap & Giveaway and Offsetting, make the system unfair and ineffective. But the last devil, which I call Distraction, makes it downright dangerous. See there are real solutions out there, but cap and trade with its loopholes and promises of riches have made many people forget all about them.

We're not even close to a global agreement on a carbon cap to begin with, and duh, this is the whole point of cap and trade. But instead of hammering out a fair and strong deal, we're putting the cart before the horse and rushing off to trade schemes and offsets.

With all the bogus offset projects, huge giveaways to polluters, and the failure to address the injustices of climate change do you think the Third World will get on board with a global cap? I doubt it. If a cap and trade proposal is stopping us from actually capping carbon, it's a dangerous distraction.

We don't need to let *these* guys design the solution. We – us, our governments - can make laws and do it ourselves.

In my country, we already have a law – the Clean Air Act – that confirms that carbon is a pollutant which our environmental agency is allowed to cap. So what are we waiting for? Go EPA go! Cap that carbon!

Instead, a U.S. cap and trade law proposed in 2009 guts the Clean Air Act, leaving it to the market to fix the problem. If a cap and trade proposal weakens our ability to make strong laws, it's a distraction.

Concerned citizens around the world need to speak out and demand we redesign our economies away from fossil fuels. But cap and trade



I wanted to reach people in both their heads and their hearts. Communicating and building relationships and strengthening our communities of resistance and organising are what will set us free, not facts alone.

WIA: How has *The Story of Stuff* affected your life?

AL: *The Story of Stuff* has re-energised and re-inspired me. Our small office in California has been flooded with emails and letters from people all over the world for whom the message resonated. People have shared amazing stories about how the film helped them understand the culture of consumerism and made them rethink everything from how they spend their money to how they spend their free time. We have heard from people working on solving the problems in every possible way one can imagine, from youth education to re-designing industrial production to lobbying for fair trade and economic justice. There is no way that I could not hear from all these people and not feel hope for the future.

WIA: What was the idea behind the sequel, *The Story of Cap and Trade*?

AL: Since *The Story of Stuff* has garnered so much attention, a number of organisations have asked us to collaborate with them to make films spotlighting issues that they care about. Last summer, some friends from Climate Justice Now! approached me suggesting collaboration. They explained that both global and national policy approaches to climate change were being dominated by a business-as-usual and polluter-friendly approach that does not come close to matching the carbon reduction that science clearly shows we need. They also explained that justice and equity issues were not on the radar screen of most parties dominating these discussions, from energy companies to powerful governments to even some NGOs.

It was really clear to *The Story of Stuff* team that climate change is the most critical issue facing humanity in our lifetime and that the time to develop effective equitable solutions is running out. So we decided that if there

makes citizens think everything will be okay if we just drive a little less, change our light bulbs and let these guys do the rest. If cap and trade creates a false sense of progress, it's a dangerous distraction.

These cap and trade proposals are mostly about protecting business as usual.

Right now, the US subsidizes fossil fuels at more than twice the rate of renewables. What? We shouldn't be subsidizing fossil fuels at all!

These guys don't seem to realize that the simplest way to keep carbon out of the atmosphere is to leave it safely in the ground.

U.S. congressman, Rick Boucher, a well-known friend of the coal industry voted for cap and trade. He said it "strengthens the case for utilities to continue to use coal."

No law that encourages coal use can stop climate change. Period.

Solid caps, strong laws, citizen action, and carbon fees to pay off ecological debt and create a clean energy economy, that's how we can save our future.

Next time someone tells you Cap and Trade is the best we're gonna get, don't believe them! Better yet, talk to them. They probably want a future safe from climate change too. Maybe they've just forgotten that you can only compromise to a point before a solution isn't really a solution.

I know we'd all love to sacrifice nothing, save the planet and get rich doing it. But get real! This is the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced.

We can't solve it with the mindset – their mindset – that got us into this mess. We need something new.

It won't be easy, but it's time we dream bigger.

It's time to design a climate solution that will really work.

was a way we could leverage the attraction the film has received to help raise awareness about the false solutions currently leading the climate change discussions, we should do it and do it fast.



Annie Leonard

Annie Leonard is the author and host of the online film, *The Story of Stuff*, a fast paced, fact filled exposé on the hidden environmental and social costs of current systems of production and consumption. She is now working on a book version of the film, to be published by Free Press of Simon and Schuster in March 2010.

Annie has spent nearly two decades investigating and organising on environmental health and justice issues. She has traveled to 40 countries, visiting literally hundreds of factories where our stuff is made and dumps

where our stuff is dumped. Witnessing first hand the horrendous impacts of both over- and under- consumption around the world, Annie is fiercely dedicated to reclaiming and transforming our industrial and economic systems so they serve, rather than undermine, ecological sustainability and social equity.

Annie is currently the Director of *The Story of Stuff Project*. Prior to this, most recently, Annie coordinated the Funders Workgroup for Sustainable Production and Consumption, a funder collaborative seeking to address the hidden environmental and social impacts of current systems of making, using and throwing away all the stuff of daily life.

She has also worked with the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA), Health Care Without Harm, Essential Action and Greenpeace International.

Annie is currently on the boards of International Forum for Globalization and GAIA. She has previously served on the boards of the Grassroots Recycling Network, the Environmental Health Fund, Global Greengrants India and Greenpeace India. She finished her undergraduate studies at Barnard College, Columbia University and graduate work in City and Regional Planning at Cornell University, both in New York, United States. She lives in Bay Area, California.

Source: The Story of Stuff, URL: <http://www.storyofstuff.com/anniesbio.html>

WIA: *What are your hopes and expectations from this latest film?*

AL: My hope is that the film inspires viewers to invest the time to understand both the science and the policies related to climate change. One advantage the big oil businesses have is that climate policy is technical and wonky and even boring so many people don't bother to pay attention. Our film makes something as technical as carbon trading interesting, easy to understand and even fun to learn about. If we care about the planet as we know it, we simply have to get up to speed and join this conversation.

The Story of Cap and Trade is an easy entrance into the discussion. Once people watch the film, my hope is that they contact one of the many organisations which have links on the Storyofcapandtrade.org to learn more and, most importantly, get involved.

WIA: *What would you recommend to people who would like to communicate climate change issues, especially those who would like to highlight women and gender concerns?*

AL: I often think of the famous line by US community organiser, Saul Alinsky: "Talk to people where they are at, not where you are at." If you have been working on climate for years and you are reaching out to folks who have joined the discussions more recently, remember what it was like before you knew all the technical terms and jargon.

As organisers, we often want to do huge brain dumps, share everything we know with people. I believe organising is more about making connections and building relationships than providing facts alone. We need to figure out ways to talk about an issue as scientific and overwhelming as climate

change in a way which leaves people feeling inspired and welcome rather than excluded and helpless.

WIA: *Given the current state of the climate talks, what would you urge people to do?*

AL: Everything! Really, this is an “all hands on deck” situation. We need to address the climate crisis on every front. There are so many ways to get involved. I want people to choose the engagement that matches their skills, passions and contexts the most. Storyofcapandtrade.org and storyofstuff.org have links to many organisations, working in diverse ways – from promoting a clean energy economy to engaging in policy advocacy to stopping waste incineration.

The ways to get involved are endless. The most important thing is to just start. Dive in. Start talking to others about this issue. Attend meetings to learn more. Write for your local newspapers. Organise protests to make your voices heard. Fight against subsidies to dirty industries and redirect them to promote clean energy alternatives. Plant a community garden so you strengthen the community while providing local food. Buy less stuff. Lobby your municipal government for better public transportation. Stop new coal fired power plants.

Start an organisation to educate others and plan actions. Inject equity and sustainability into every discussion about climate in which

it is not already at the forefront. Sing and dance and spend time with those you love because really, it is the possibility for those things that we are working to save.

WIA: *Is there anything else that you would like to add?*

AL: People ask me all the time if I think we are going to change, if we are going to chart a more sustainable, more just way of living on this planet. I am confident that we will change. Right now, humanity is collectively using 1.5 planets worth of the planet’s biological production every year. That means we are consuming more resources each year than what the planet can produce in a year. This is not a good trajectory. It cannot continue indefinitely, that is why I know that we will change.

The question is not IF we will change, but HOW. Will we change by design or by default? Either way, we need some big changes. These will require hard work. Our cities, economies and industrial production systems will look a lot different in the future. If we change by design, if we work together to figure this out, we can be more intentional, more strategic and more compassionate. But if we dig our heels in, refuse to budge, delay action -for another few years, we will change by default. We will hit the ecological limits wall and be forced to change. And my worry is that it will be much uglier, more violent and less fair. ■