

## OPINION

### FEATURED GUEST COLUMN

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## 3 Key factors in revising groundrules for 21st century realities.

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We have become vulnerable to entrenched assumptions and practices that are not only failing to serve humanity's interests, but which are, collectively, an escalating threat to our future on Earth. As one of hundreds of factual analyses and reports substantiating this assertion, consider the recently issued National Climate Assessment, the fifth in a series of such evaluations mandated by Congress.

The report documents numerous threats to property, health, and environment. Among them are the increasing extreme-weather events caused by human activities emitting heat-trapping gases – primarily carbon dioxide and methane from using fossil fuels – costing U.S. citizens over \$150 billion annually in recent years. These destructive effects include:

- Wildfires – Destroying carbon-storing capacity while amplifying heat-trapping gas emissions.
- Drought – Killing crops, destroying communities and habitats, endangering millions of people.
- Hurricanes & floods – Worsening property damage and eliminating affordable insurance coverage.
- Extreme heat – Causing premature deaths and a range of degenerative heat-related diseases.
- Extinctions – Entire species are being lost at about a thousand times the historical average.

Cumulatively, these costly worldwide effects are accelerating, and aside from the tragically inequitable financial penalties, they're creating worsening living conditions that will become intolerable unless pivotal changes are quickly made in how humans use the Earth to support quality of life. This will mean finding viable means to curtail the destructive assaults of our reckless industrialized economy.

But the implications of these findings are not new, only more alarming due to woefully deficient efforts to appropriately respond to four prior climate assessments, beginning over 20 years ago. The reasons for failing to significantly restructure our social and economic institutions despite factual analysis are complex and disputed, but one thing is certain: due to unprecedented environmental damage to life-support systems caused by overriding human activities, the measures for guiding these activities must be judiciously restructured.

The following three factors must be well-integrated into these new institutional guidelines.

### Honoring Environmental Limits

Fifty years ago, a landmark book, *The Limits to Growth*, presented the inevitably destructive effects on the condition of vital world resources caused by irresponsible industrialization and population growth.

Through artificially isolating human activities from the natural systems upon which all life depends, over the five decades since these dire predictions were made, they have become conclusively exhibited. To prevent environmental collapse and an uninhabitable planet, future economic choices must be based upon reliable evaluation of their consequences on life-support systems. Among other things, this will require a well-developed 'circular economy' that maximizes the reuse of resources, applying methods that minimize harm and conform with environmental limits.

### **Merging Individual and Common Interest**

Western values now dominating the global economy, epitomized by the American culture, have emphasized self-reliance and individual ambitions that have all too often neglected the common good, with disastrous results. These contrasting outcomes were memorably described as "private affluence amid public squalor" by the well-respected economist John Kenneth Galbraith. Similar negligence has been manifested in U.S. policies adopted over recent decades, as corporate influences have overpowered political and economic agendas, exacerbated and sanctioned by the 2010 Supreme Court decision, Citizens United. That disruptive landmark ruling granted Constitutional protections for corporate political spending as a form of free speech. Yet, human prospects on Planet Earth cannot be served if corporate motives and methods continue to prevail, because individual liberty, economic justice, and environmental viability will increasingly suffer the dire impacts of insatiable profit-and-growth mega-business agendas. Any durable emerging civilization must be based on institutions that transparently reconcile – and accountably integrate – individual rights and the common good to prevent exploitation of the many by the opportunistic few.

### **Time horizon**

Directly related to the above dominance of profitmaking constructs are the devious effects of short-term thinking that impede the forethought needed to ensure that consequential decisions are properly evaluated, and unwise choices are prevented. But negligent myopic perspective is rewarded by the rigid aims of quarterly and annual profit-maximizing, which routinely forfeit unexamined future well-being for near-term opportunities. The responsible accountability required to prevent continued destruction of life-support systems demands that both individual and collective decisions are guided by longer-term viewpoints. Rather than guaranteeing stock dividends for the next quarter or prolonging annual growth, key decisions must combine the goals of meeting near-term human needs with the rigorous, well-informed long-term conservation of world resource systems. To achieve enlightened economic and social objectives, our ever-advancing information-gathering and analytical capabilities must be dedicated to serving the complex demands of a 'mixed scanning' approach that continually surveys and justly reevaluates the dynamic landscape of our socio-geo-political biosphere.