

Thinking as if Climate Matters

STABILIZING OUR CLIMATE WILL REQUIRE AN ATTITUDE SHIFT FROM “ME” TO “WE.”

It's an early spring morning in the year 2035. By midday, the temperature will hit the century mark, so you rise at dawn to get an early start in your garden. The news at breakfast describes extreme droughts, windstorms, and floods occurring across the globe. A reporter says key crops are again collapsing. You hope your garden will survive.

Some climate scientists foresee this unsettling scenario, brought on by the growing amounts of greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere. If we do nothing to dramatically reduce emissions in the next few years, the planet will continue to heat up. Since no one wants this, we must learn how to think and act now to ensure a different future. The first step is to understand why our climate is changing.

Life exists on Earth because a mix of atmospheric gases surrounds it, traps heat, and keeps temperatures at a level favorable to living creatures. The concentration of greenhouse gases in Earth's atmosphere has now reached 400 parts per million—notably higher than it has been in 3 million years. The extra gases, which include carbon dioxide that scientists have traced to human activities, trap additional heat, leading to more extreme weather and other destructive impacts.

We all contribute to climate disruption through the coal, natural gas, and other fossil-fuel-based energy we use. No one can avoid the negative impacts of climate change, nor can any individual alone resolve the problem. We are in this together.

Only by caring for the collective “we”—which means other people, here and abroad, and the climate and ecological systems that sustain us—will anyone be safe and prosper. Through my work with the Resource Innovation Group, a nonprofit organization that promotes climate solutions, I've learned that five commitments can help individuals make choices that reduce their contribution to the climate crisis.

Recognize and respect your place in the web of life. As a gardener, you know that temperature, precipitation, soil, and other factors combine to determine the health of your plants. Likewise, our lives are sustained by interlinked ecological and



social systems. If you fail to consider the intricate web of interactions that maintain life, you will often impair it. The first and most important commitment you must make to reduce climate disruption is to understand the context in which you exist.

Account for the consequences of your actions. You can, for example, identify how higher temperatures caused by burning fossil fuels might affect precipitation, sunlight, and other natural inputs that support your food system. Some activities might produce short-term benefits, such as fewer pests or larger plant growth, but ultimately undermine the climate and

thus the web of life, including entire food systems.

Do no harm. The most universally held principle of morality, “do no harm” requires actively reducing your negative impacts on the climate. Consider, for example, eliminating products that are derived from oil, packaged in plastic, or shipped long distances. Avoid garden products that kill beneficial insects, fish, and wildlife. Keep looking for ways to “do no harm” by shifting to certified organic products and sustainable practices.

Acknowledge your trustee obligations. Many scientists have concluded that humankind's impacts on the environment have become so great that our actions, not natural processes, will now decide the fate of life on Earth. This means we are now the trustees of the planet. What we do from this point forward will determine which organisms live and die. Using clean renewable energy, planting trees, and converting your lawn into a bountiful organic garden are examples of how you can be a trustee and help restore the Earth's ecosystems.

Choose your destiny. This last commitment is the key to your ability to abide by all of the others. Social change happens after people break from convention. It will not be easy. But with determination, you can significantly reduce your emissions and help restore the climate's natural stability.

Climate change is the most serious issue facing humanity. If you and many others like you strive to abide by the five commitments, climate disruption will be reduced and everyone will end up better off. —*Bob Doppelt*