

# World finally grasps climate change threat

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I was not in Paris the night of the terrorist attacks. But I was in Europe, in part to meet with groups before the United Nations Climate Summit. Given the fear and anger in Paris, and the tremendous difficulty in getting the international community to agree on anything, both the process and outcomes were nothing less than remarkable.

First, it was amazing that the world leaders at the summit refused to allow an atmosphere of fear to permeate and undermine negotiations. Officials did not react in a way that played into the hands of the murderers.

It was also notable that civil protests and environmental activism went on more or less as they had at previous UN summits. It would have been easy for officials to categorize activism as a security risk and institute authoritarian controls. However, contrary to what the killers undoubtedly hoped to see, people's right to speak out and demonstrate was mostly upheld. This was particularly true toward the end of the summit.

Second, even though it is not legally binding, the final agreement is extraordinary. It calls for the rise in average global surface temperatures to be constrained to "well below" 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit above pre-industrial levels. This, for the first time, represents a clear acknowledgement that allowing temperatures to rise by 3.6 degrees — which until now has been the accepted target — will submerge many small island states and risk unleashing uncontrollable civilization-altering climate disruption.

In addition, 187 nations, representing 94 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, submitted plans to reduce them. In aggregate the plans do not come close to keeping temperatures from rising by more than 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit — which is the maximum level scientists believe can be tolerated without

causing runaway climate disruption. However, the nations that approved the agreement consented to continually assess their emissions and submit more ambitious reduction plans every five years.

Knowing that the failure to slash emissions might prove catastrophic for their people and trigger scorn worldwide might motivate many countries to keep cutting emissions.

The Paris Accord also calls on the U.S. and other wealthy nations to provide at least \$100 billion annually to help poor nations shift to renewable sources of energy and prepare for the now-inevitable damage caused by rising temperatures.

Finally, the accord emphasizes the critical role of forests. It urges all nations to reduce “emissions from deforestation and forest degradation” and to “conserve and enhance ... sinks and reservoirs,” which means forests and other ecosystems that draw carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and store it.

The United States is a party to the accord. Government officials at all levels and forest management agencies now have a responsibility to adopt practices and policies to enhance forests’ capacity to sequester carbon.

The agreement is far from perfect. Countries that fail to cut emissions face no legal penalty, and Republicans in Congress will likely try to block the funding the U.S. said it will provide to help poor nations.

But getting a global agreement on this many key important issues is unprecedented. It signifies that most world leaders now grasp the precarious situation humanity faces if we do not rapidly slash fossil fuel use and protect and restore forests and other ecosystems that sequester carbon.

Still another remarkable aspect of the UN Summit was the role played by the Obama administration. At most previous summits, the U.S. was a major obstacle. President Obama and his staff changed this. Along with the UN staff and summit hosts, they played key roles in crafting an agreement that can now serve as a framework for future action. If the accord helps prevent uncontrollable climate disruption, future generations will give the president credit.

Finally, what was left unaddressed at COP 21 is also significant. The biggest elephant in the room is that the climate crisis reveals the limits of unlimited

economic growth. Rather than acknowledging this, many participants claimed that more economic growth — albeit this time “greener” growth — is the solution. However, most previous efforts to decouple economic growth from environmental impacts have failed. Resolving this conundrum will be our greatest challenge.

Every decision we make now has global implications, whether it’s about fossil fuel use, material and energy consumption, forest management, other types of land use or waste generation. Whether we like it or not, if civilization-altering climate disruption is to be prevented, everyone in Lane County and nationwide must now incorporate environmental concerns into their everyday behavior.

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