

The Climate Crisis and Corrupt Politics

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*Overcoming the Powerful Forces
that Threaten Our Future*

Larry J. Schweiger



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my five grandsons, Maclean, Sutton, Patrick, Thadius, and Robert. Children will suffer from our repeated failures to overcome the fossil fuel industry's climate falsehoods and firm grip on the reins of government. More and more people are now fighting back against those who are knowingly destroying our living world. We must also reject every politician at every level that fails to act. America must lead the way for the sake of all children; we must act now to address this existential threat before its too late.

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Preface

As a teenager, I once stood stunned and disheartened on a Lake Erie beach. The beaches were blackened by slime, littered with decaying fishes, broken bottles, and heaps of driftwood. Flies and mosquitoes hovered over the rotting remains. The air reeked of the stench of raw sewage as each churning breaker released its anoxic cargo. Lake Erie was rife with oxygen-depleting algae from raw, untreated treated sewage that flowed from lakeside cities, and towns. Cleveland's Cuyahoga River flowing into Lake Erie had so much petroleum and other flammable liquids on it that it caught on fire on eight separate occasions. The last Cuyahoga fire was so hot that it warped the steel undercarriage on one of its bridges. I was witnessing the near-death of one of the world's great lakes, and the extinction of Lake Erie's once famed blue pike as they rotted in the surf. It's been more than fifty-five years since I witnessed the polluted shores of Lake Erie, and vowed to make the environment my life's purpose. As Mark Twain once observed, "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born, and the day you find out why."¹ This was my day to find out why as I made a vow to spend my life defending our environment.

I have long been deeply troubled by the projected rates and magnitude of species extinction that far exceeds background rates and the planetary-scale human agency of this loss. Many factors including pollution, habitat loss, invasive species, toxics, and overharvesting, but the linkage to the climate crisis is unmistakable. Climate change is the trump card to species extinction. The 2004 IPCC report cited published science from a team of leading ecological scientists that warned that up to 70 percent of all species could be extinct if the climate crisis is not addressed. This report moved

me to return to Washington to head the National Wildlife Federation to lead the fight for responsible climate policies.

No matter where I look in the world, fish, and wildlife are in retreat in the face of human population expansion. Since that time, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment warned that the climate crisis is likely to become one of the most significant drivers of biodiversity loss by the end of the century. We have reduced the total number of mammals, birds, fish, and reptiles by 60% since 1970, leading 59 of the world's foremost experts to warn that the annihilation of wildlife is now an emergency that threatens civilization.² The climate crisis is also putting additional pressure on already vulnerable amphibians, including most frog species. Sex selection among turtles is temperature driven. A two-degree rise in egg temperature turns all newborn turtles into females, and that pattern is showing up all over the world. In recent days, we have learned that 40% of the insect species may be on the road to extinction, and most may be gone in a hundred years.³ With their demise, a long list of fish, and wildlife that depend on protein from insects. Human life is dependent upon insects like pollinators, so this biodiversity collapse is personal.

Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services recently issued an urgent report entitled: *Nature's Dangerous Decline 'Unprecedented' Species Extinction Rates 'Accelerating'* compiled by 145 expert authors from 50 countries over the past three years, with inputs from another 310 contributing authors. Based on the systematic review of about 15,000 scientific, and government sources and indigenous, and local knowledge, the study found a million species are threatened with extinction.

In Genesis 6:19 God instructed Noah to "keep them alive with you." With hubris towards nature, humanity is failing to take action to keep wildlife alive with us. "Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history, and the rate of species extinction is accelerating, with grave impacts on people around the world now likely. More than 40% of amphibian species, almost 33% of reef-forming corals, and more than a third of all marine mammals are threatened. Coral reefs occupy one percent of the ocean, yet they are critical habitat for twenty-five percent of the world's marine fishery. Warming and acidifying waters, destructive fishing practices, and agricultural and urban runoff are destroying reefs

all over the world.⁴ The picture is less clear for insect species, but available evidence supports a tentative estimate of 10% being threatened with steep declines around the world. At least 680 vertebrate species had been driven to extinction since the 16th century, and more than 9% of all domesticated breeds of mammals used for food, and agriculture had become extinct by 2016, with at least 1,000 more breeds still threatened.⁵

“The latest IPCC report issued on October 8, 2018 does not mince words about the state of our planet: we must act now to achieve global change at a scale that has “no documented historical precedent” in order to avoid the climate catastrophe that would result from a 2 degree C rise in average global temperature.”⁶ “A Skeptical Science peer-reviewed survey of over 12,000 peer-reviewed abstracts on the subject ‘global climate change,’ and ‘global warming’ published between 1991, and 2011 (Cook et al. 2013) found that over 97% of the papers taking a position on the subject agreed with the consensus position that humans are causing global warming.”⁷ A 2004 survey by Oreskes of all peer-reviewed abstracts on climate change published between 1993, and 2003 found that not a single paper rejected the consensus position that the climate crisis is human-caused.⁸ Our politicians have heard from the world’s top climate scientists and have collectively ignored or failed to heed compelling scientific warnings. While under the influence of Fossil fuel money, Congress has failed to enact carbon pollution controls at a scale that will save life on earth.

Current CO₂ levels of 414 parts per million (ppm) were last seen on Earth over three million years ago according to the most detailed reconstruction of the Earth’s climate by researchers at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research published in *Science Advances*. We are rolling back to the Mid-Pliocene when the average global temperatures were between 2, and 3 degrees C. warmer than present levels, and the Arctic Sea was free of ice, and much of the Greenland ice sheet melted. Sea levels are higher by between 13, and 37 meters. The Arctic is experiencing radical changes in 2019 with widespread fires in Alaska tundra, Canada’s Boreal forests, and unprecedented fires in the Siberian tundra. Ice melt in Greenland may exceed the 2012 record melt and southern Greenland has experienced fires. Every coastal city, mega-delta, low-lying coastal land, and every island are at impending long-term danger as sea levels climb, and storm winds amplify wave heights.

The climate crisis has been increasing linearly, but as the cryosphere deteriorates, and releases its long-frozen methane, and carbon dioxide, and burns, and as the reflection (albedo) declines, we should prepare for nonlinear, and abrupt changes that will make life miserable. We are failing to respect the magnifying risks of the ice-albedo feedbacks that are pushing the Arctic to an ice-free tipping point. Ice melt responds to increasing heat in the Arctic. All life as we know it would become unbearable if the Arctic permafrost gives up its stores of CO₂ and methane. “Daniel Rothman, professor of geophysics and co-director of the Lorenz Center in MIT’s Department of Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences, has found that when the rate at which carbon dioxide enters the oceans pushes past a certain threshold—whether as the result of a sudden burst or a slow, steady influx—the Earth may respond with a runaway cascade of chemical feedbacks, leading to extreme ocean acidification that dramatically amplifies the effects of the original trigger.”⁹ Rothman warned of a sixth mass extinction in 2017.

We are also trashing oceans with heat, plastics, sediments, toxics and pharmaceuticals. Mussels from Puget Sound for example harbor estrogen, oxycodone, and a chemotherapy drug Melphalan, and even illegal opioids.¹⁰ During this same time frame, trillions of tons of carbon in its various forms have been spewed into the biosphere where these pollutants acidify, and overheat the oceans, exacerbate the ozone layer, disrupt the climate system, and cause more violent weather conditions including floods, droughts, and fires. Ninety-three percent of global warming heat is absorbed into the oceans.

Society has collectively ignored climate science for decades, and now we need to decarbonize our lives on an unprecedented speed and scale. It is not enough to lament our failures and senseless acts; we must find a new way to move forward rapidly. Our children will already live in a world with a more hostile climate system from our past failures. Things on planet earth are bad now, and will only get much worse if we fail to grasp the truth that we are fast approaching a climate cliff. We must repent from our high-carbon ways, and stop betraying our children, and their children with catastrophic storms, droughts, fires, disease, mass extinctions, and unspeakable distress.

We have been too distracted to respond to melting glaciers, ocean acidification, and sea-level rise, more powerful storms, and floods, devastating fires, and extinctions. Albert Einstein had it right when he warned, “The world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don’t do anything about it.”¹¹ Our continued failure is a betrayal of our children and grandchildren. Our lives here on Earth will be measured by what we leave behind. Proverbs define a “good person” regarding their legacy this way, “A good person leaves an inheritance to his children’s children ...”¹² Parents who love their offspring more than they love material wealth would not knowingly harm their offspring by destroying their world. I do not know a loving parent or grandparent who would deliberately damage their children’s future, yet that is what we are collectively doing.

I wrote a book entitled: *Last Chance: Preserving Life on Earth* that was published by Fulcrum Press on September 1, 2009, eight days before my third grandson was born.¹³ Based on available science at that time, I warned that while amassing more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, we might be facing our last chance to avoid the destructive consequences of the climate crisis. If we failed to cut carbon pollution, it would have dire consequences on all of nature, including humanity. A retired medical doctor in Missouri read my book and sent National Wildlife Federation a check for ten thousand dollars to give a copy of *Last Chance* to every member of Congress. We did just that, and only Senator Feingold, who took an extreme position on gifts to members of Congress refused to accept it as he saw it as a “gift.” I also gave a copy to President Obama during a Rose Garden celebration of the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, and to several cabinet members.

While science doesn’t stand still, and I have not retreated on any of the details in my first book while the case for the last chance has only gotten painfully more dire. I wish I were wrong. At the time of publication, we could bend the carbon emissions curve by cutting pollution by about 3% per year to stay below the threshold levels that the scientists have long warned. We had our last chance to avoid terrible consequences with reasonable accommodations. We must now fight to prevent a catastrophic climate crisis.

On September 9, 2009, I witnessed the birth of Sutton, one of my five grandsons. My daughter Carolyn gave me the honor of cutting the umbilical cord. I watched as this beautiful baby left the safety of his mother's womb, and entered a new world that humans are profoundly altering. The doctor clamped the umbilical cord and handed me the scissors. It was a tearful yet sweet moment. Sweet because I witnessed the arrival of an awaited grandson that I will spend time outdoors within the days that we might have together. Sweet also because I knew Carolyn would be a great mom. It was a bitter moment because I was about to sever this newborn from the final vestige of security. He was leaving his mother's womb and entering a world that is increasingly overheating spawning both deluge, and drought. His world will be more uncertain with intensifying storms, deepening droughts, massive forest fires, acidifying oceans, and threatened drought-plagued cities. He and his peers deserve a safe world. While holding the scissors, I was renewing my Lake Erie vow and promising at that moment that I would do everything possible to stop this insanity. I must have been taking too long with my vow because the doctor, with some frustration in his voice, asked, "Are you going to do this or what?"

Seeing Sutton and my four other grandsons remind me that I cannot think only of myself. As a father and grandfather when I am on my deathbed, I want to know that my children and grandchildren are going to be OK—not facing a dystopian future because I did not do enough. My long involvement with efforts to control climate-change pollution was rooted in grave concerns for conserving natural terrestrial, freshwater, and marine ecosystems, and love for all children. I am committed to a higher duty to "leave an inheritance to our children's children."

As we approach the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day, those of us who participated in the first Earth Day should be able to celebrate our successes, and there have been some, but it's not that easy. I look back to the college field trip I organized during that first Earth Day to see the last pair of bald eagles in Pennsylvania, and I savor the dramatic progress made with over 300 nesting pairs of eagles in Pennsylvania alone, and other raptor's steady recovery since DDT was banned. The generation that launched a powerful modern environmental movement in the '70s, and '80s was ill prepared for the highly organized corporate backlash on our efforts to curb climate change.

The anti-environmental forces are extremely well-funded and made up of numerous organizations from the U. S. Chamber of Commerce, Club for Growth, and American Petroleum Institute to the Cato Institute, and American Legislative Exchange Council. Several other political entities too numerous to list have also played a long game with a political stratagem aimed at keeping the GOP in power to block action on climate change. Greedy manipulators have misled low-information, and resentful voters like a finely tuned fiddle for their advantage. They have corrupted our democracy with gerrymandering, voter suppression, and with unlimited fossil fuel money in elections at nearly every level.

To maintain their monopolistic grip on the source of our energy and to prevent the shift to clean energy, the major oil/gas companies through their lawmakers maintain a salubrious U.S. energy subsidy policy that tilts the entire playing field to their benefit. A recent International Monetary Fund study found \$5.2 trillion in fossil fuel subsidies in 2017. The equivalent of over 6.5% of the global GDP of that year, it also represented a half-trillion dollar increase since 2015. James Ellsmoor writing for Forbes, explained, “The study includes the negative externalities caused by fossil fuels that society has to pay for, not reflected in their actual costs. In addition to direct transfers of government money to fossil fuel companies, this includes the indirect costs of pollution, such as healthcare costs and climate change adaptation. By including these numbers, the true cost of fossil fuel use to society is reflected.”¹⁴

Fossil fuel lobbyists and other bottom-feeding shills have figured out how to put sand in the slow-moving gears of the legislative process particularly surrounding energy policy, and carbon pollution control. They are knowingly betraying our children by preventing Congress and enabling the White House to block any progress on curbing climate pollution.

In this book, I will attempt to disclose the central role that big oil, coal, and gas interests have played in distorting American politics for decades through the flow of fossil fuel money to candidates directly, through super PACs, and through fabricated entities with benign-sounding names that distract voters and distort science. They have taken advantage of unrestricted independent expenditures for deception, and their cash flows to the various media through misleading and often fraudulent advertising that promoted clean coal, mythical carbon capture, and various

other diversions. They have been rewarded for their annual billion-dollar investments when elected officials gauge their support or rejection of legislation based on their donors-not on science or their voters-regardless of how it affects the economic or ecological viability of America.

The fossil fuel industry's elaborate control over the American political apparatus has stifled all efforts to control carbon pollution. While those of us in the environmental movement have been upfront about our efforts to protect human health, the natural environment, and to end carbon pollution, they were making big plans behind the corporate curtains to subdue the political apparatus. Now that the curtain is pulled back, we can see the ways they have been rewiring our electoral system to control the outcome of climate change policies, fish, and wildlife conservation, and other environmental threats.

Regarding measurable results in the early days, the traditional environmental cause has atrophied in recent years with shrinking influence when it should be in the front of our minds. Some critics suggest the environmental movement has become superannuated. Others claim we have overreached. I have a very different view. I've long been passionate about leadership development and mentoring a new generation of leaders yet I acknowledge that for the most part we have failed to prepare the next generations adequately.¹⁵ Environmental education in public schools was to be integrated into other subjects, but it got lost in our educational apparatus when test scores became the paramount reason and when talking about climate change got tagged as "too political." Far too many parents have for various reasons not made those vital connections between their children, and nature. Far too many baby boomers have neglected to mentor and equip the next generation to love and care for a fragile natural world upon which all life depends. Gadget-bound kids rarely have time or inclination for nature. That may sound harsh, but it is the reality we now face, and we must chart a path forward that involves our children and their future.

While other environmentalists have their personal experiences to share, I believe the advocates in my generation still have something to offer a new generation of environmental leaders emerging with the Green New Deal, Sunrise Movement, and Student Strikes spreading across our globe. We can share our experiences through the epic struggle of our

time to help avoid history repeating itself. Perhaps, our most significant contribution will be to cheer others as we pass the torch to a new generation of leaders. When our stories, and experiences are knitted together, perhaps future generations dredging through the detritus of this generation will have a complete historical picture of what we were trying to do when things on earth went so wrong.

This book weaves through Harrisburg, Pennsylvania where frack-gas reigns supreme, and in Washington D.C. where climate policies have gone to die. I also share energy struggles from some particular places across America. I was involved with five paradigmatic environmental struggles, including the Exxon Valdez spill, Three Mile Island, the BP spill, and I played an advocacy role in curbing acid rain, and continue advocating for climate policies. I share some of my experiences during the Exxon Valdez and BP oil spill, and my life-long struggle to stop the climate crisis in hopes of reawakening a democratic electorate with the determination to rein in polluters and move to a clean energy economy.

I have long been concerned about our role in changing the climate. In an article written in the summer of 1979, and entered into the Congressional Record by the late Senator John Heinz, I warned that climate change was one of the two top threats to our natural world, and my concerns have only increased. Atmospheric carbon dioxide levels have risen from 340 to 415 parts per million since I first started campaigning for climate action. I've attempted to paint the history behind critical environmental struggles while exploring the urgently needed changes to heal our broken democracy. We must address the climate crisis and heal nature while restoring justice for all. It is hard to acknowledge that decades of extraordinary efforts by so many dedicated people may have had a little long-term effect on public policies to end carbon pollution.

A study published by M. Willeit, A. Ganopolski, R. Calov, and V. Brovkin in *Science Advances* on Apr 3rd 2019, "Our results suggest that the current CO₂ concentration is unprecedented over the past 3 million years and that global temperature never exceeded the preindustrial value by more than 2°C. during the Quaternary." Recognizable that humans have existed for 2.6 million years, we are now outside the carbon range in human existence.¹⁶ "Their in-depth analysis of plant fossils and sediments reveal that such CO₂ levels were last seen in the late Pliocene Epoch, a time

when no ice sheets were covering either Greenland or West Antarctica, and much of the East Antarctic ice sheet was gone. Temperatures were up to 7 degrees Fahrenheit warmer globally, at least double that at the poles, and sea levels were some 20 meters (65 feet) higher.” Jane Francis, director of the British Antarctic Survey, told *The UK Guardian*. “They found fossil leaves of southern beech. I call them the last forests of Antarctica.”

There have been lots of international talks and climate conferences, but little follow-through in far too many countries. Despite 24 years of international conferences, failed agreements, stifled legislative efforts, and many empty promises, carbon pollution has dramatically increased. Humans were adding less than 1 ppm when I first started to be troubled by climate change. Humans are now adding double that amount. As a result of our failures, the world is enshrouded in a blanket of carbon dioxide that is 414 ppm thick, and climbing faster than ever as nature is starting to release its stored carbon dioxide and methane. We have no time left to lose. Heat waves, methane leakage, and tundra fires in the Arctic Circle, and alarming news of Arctic sea ice melting and Antarctic ice shelves breaking up. The climate crisis may be approaching a non-linear point of no return when nature gives up its carbon stores in the frozen tundra, agricultural soils, and clathrates.

To avoid the most catastrophic impacts of the climate crisis, and keep global warming below 1.5°C–2.0°C, we must keep fossil fuels in the ground. To do that, we must rapidly shift public and private investments away from tar sands, frack-gas and shale oil, and towards sustainable energy solutions for all. We are now past the point where we can rescue the summer Arctic ice, or avoid destructive consequences of fierce storms, excessive rainfall, mega-fires, extreme droughts, and flooded streets from sea-level rise, but hopefully, we are not beyond a complete runaway climate system. While we cannot be sure, we must now adapt to the climate disruptions we cannot avoid while doing everything possible to prevent the utter calamity that will befall our children, and their children if we fail to pursue an aggressive pollution control strategy.

A viable democracy is critical to the mission of securing climate solutions, protecting clean air, pure water, and conserving nature. The combined forces of fossil fuel and libertarian-moneyed interests are robbing our democracy of its essence and dragging planetary security down in

its undertow. I will explore the many ways the fossil fuel industry has manipulated the many societal forces that prevented lawmakers from enacting responsible climate, and environmental statutes. Their fossil fuel money is not just stopping progress on environmental protection but thwarting urgently needed actions to save life on earth.

The fossil fuel industry presents enormous national economic, and security risks. Trump supporters are facing fundamental moral and ethical compromises, and their continued support of Trump and climate denying lawmakers are forcing incalculable ecological damage to the entire planet.¹⁷ Try as we might, we have failed to overcome the many deceptions, and political influences of the fossil fuel interests to address the climate crisis. As we watch the criminal enterprise that is our current administration with several cabinet secretaries and their minions breaking everything in sight, it is easy to become disheartened, and defeated. The Trump administration is beating us into submission with a barrage of environmental rule changes, leases, punitive agency budget cuts, and failure to enforce the laws, but we must not give in to the bullying, lies, and destructive actions.

Democracy is a fragile thing. Graft and corruption are not new, but the opportunities for fraudulent activity has significantly increased with international interventions by Russian operatives, and the possibility of moving money through foreign banks, untraceable bitcoins, or other electronic offshore money transfers. The erosion of democracy, violations of the emoluments clause and the dramatic spike in graft and corruption under the Trump administration has caused the U.S. to plunge six places to 22nd on the global corruption index in 2018 according to Transparency International.¹⁸ Brazen Russian influence peddling through social media and attacks on voting machines should sober every American who loves democracy, as the administration does nothing to stop it in 2020.

SECTION I

**The First Thirty Years:
Environmental Awakening**

CHAPTER 1

The Modern Environmental Movement of the 20th Century

Things got very bad before the public finally woke up to the consequences of environmental degradation. At the time, Pennsylvania had more than 10,000 miles of rivers and streams heavily damaged by acid mine drainage, untreated sewage, and industrial wastes. During the 1940s and '50s, Philadelphia's Waterworks was forced to do desilting projects to remove more than 100 years of accumulated coal silt that was dumped in the headwaters of the Schuylkill River. In Pittsburgh, the Monongahela River was a dead river polluted with cyanide-laden pickle liquors from the steel mills while the Allegheny River ran with blood from the slaughterhouses on Herr's Island.

So much coal silt floated down the Susquehanna River from upstream coal washing deliberately dumped from facilities as far north as Luzerne, and Lackawanna counties that a power company set up a river dredge, and collected wastes sufficient to run their plant for fifty years. "For years, commercial dredging was done in the Holtwood impoundment (Lake Aldred), and later in the Safe Harbor impoundment (Lake Clarke)."¹⁹ The Holtwood Steam Electric Station was located on the river to burn free coal silt that washed down the Susquehanna River. Holtwood operators were forced to purchase coal after enormous sediment deposits from Hurricane Agnes in 1972 buried the last of the Susquehanna coal silt.