



Deep Green Resistance: Strategy to Save the Planet Excerpt

All content below is excerpted from the book
Deep Green Resistance: Strategy to Save the Planet
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Excerpted from Part I: Resistance

The Problem by Lierre Keith

A black tern weighs barely two ounces. On bodily reserves less than a bag of M & Ms and wings that stretch to cover twelve inches, she'll fly thousands of miles, searching for the wetlands that will harbor her young. And every year the journey gets longer as the wetlands are desiccated for human demands. Every year the tern, desperate and hungry, loses, while civilization, endless and sanguineous, wins.

A polar bear should weigh 650 pounds. Her biological reserves may have to see her through nine long months of dark, denned gestation, and then lactation, giving up her dwindling stores to the needy mouths of her species' future. In some areas, the female's weight has dropped from 650 to 507 pounds. Meanwhile, the ice has evaporated like the wetlands. When she wakes, the waters will stretch impassably opened, and there is no Abrahamic god of bears to part them for her.

The Aldabra snail should weigh something, but all that's left to weigh are their skeletons, bits of orange and indigo shells. The snail has been declared not just extinct, but the first casualty of global warming. In dry periods, the snail hibernated. The young of any species are always more vulnerable. In this case, the adults' "reproductive success" was a "complete failure." In plain terms, the babies died and kept dying, and a species millions of years old is now a pile of shell fragments.

We are living in a period of mass extinction. What is your personal carrying capacity for grief, rage, despair? The numbers stand at 120 species a day. That's 50,000 a year. This culture is oblivious to their passing, entitled to their every last niche, and there is no roll call on the nightly news.

We already have a name for the tsunami wave of extermination: the Holocene extinction event. There's no asteroid this time, only human behavior, behavior that we could choose to stop. Adolph Eichman's excuse was that no one told him that the concentration camps were wrong. We've all seen the pictures of the drowning polar bears. Are we so ethically numb that we need to be told this is wrong?

There are voices raised in concern, even anguish, at the plight of the earth, the rending of its species. "Only zero emissions can prevent a warmer planet," one pair of climatologists declared. Or James Lovelock, originator of the Gaia hypothesis, who states bluntly that global warming has passed the tipping point, carbon offsetting is a joke, and that "individual lifestyle adjustments" are "a deluded fantasy." It's all true. And self-evident. "Simple living" should start with simple observation: if burning fossil fuels will kill the planet, then stop burning them.

But that conclusion, in all its stark clarity, is not the one anyone's drawing, from the policy makers to the environmental groups. When they start offering solutions is the exact moment when they stop telling the truth, inconvenient or otherwise. Google "global warming solutions." The first paid sponsor, www.CampaignEarth.org, urges "No doom and gloom!! When was the last time depression got you really motivated? We're here to inspire realistic action steps and stories of success." By "realistic" they don't mean solutions that actually match the scale of the problem. They mean the usual consumer choices—cloth shopping bags, travel mugs, and misguided dietary advice—which will do exactly nothing to disrupt the troika of industrialization, capitalism, and patriarchy that is skinning the planet alive. But since these actions also won't disrupt anyone's life, they're declared both realistic and a success.

The next site offers the ever-crucial Global Warming Bracelets and, more importantly, Flip Flops. Polar bears everywhere are weeping with relief. The site's Take Action page includes the usual buying light bulbs, inflating tires, filling dishwashers, shortening showers, and rearranging the deck chairs.

The first non-commercial site is the Union of Concerned Scientists. As one might expect, there's no explanation points but instead a statement that "[t]he burning of fossil fuel (oil, coal, and natural gas) alone counts for about 75 percent of annual CO2 emissions." This is followed by a list of Five Sensible Steps. Step #1 is—no, not stop burning fossil fuel—but "Make Better Cars and SUVs." Never mind that the automobile itself is the pollution, with its demands—for space, for speed, for fuel—in complete opposition to the needs of both a viable human community and a living planet. Like all the others, the

scientists refuse to call industrial civilization into question. We can have a living planet and the consumption that's killing the planet, can't we?

The principle here is very simple. As Derrick has written, "[A]ny social system based on the use of nonrenewable resources is by definition unsustainable." By definition, nonrenewable means it will eventually run out. Once you've grasped that intellectual complexity, you can move on to the next level. "Any culture based on the nonrenewable use of renewable resources is just as unsustainable." Trees are renewable. But if we use them faster than they can grow, the forest will turn to desert. Which is precisely what civilization has been doing for its 10,000 year campaign, running through soil, rivers, and forests as well as metal, coal, and oil. The oceans are almost dead, 90 percent of the large fish devoured, and the plankton populations are collapsing, populations which both feed the life of the oceans and create oxygen for the planet. What will we fill our lungs with when they are gone? The plastics with which that industrial civilization is replacing them? Because in parts of the Pacific, plastic outweighs plankton 48 to 1. Imagine your blood, your heart, crammed with toxic materials—not just chemicals but physical gunk—until there was ten times more of it than you. What metaphor would be adequate to the dying oceans? Cancer? Suffocation? Crucifixion?

Meanwhile, the oceans don't need our metaphors. They need action. They need industrial civilization to stop destroying and devouring; failing that, they need us to make it stop.

Which is why we are writing this book.

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The truth is that this culture is insane. When Derrick asks his audiences, "Does anyone here believe that our culture will undergo a voluntary transformation to a sane and sustainable way of living?"—and he's asked it for years, all around the country—no one says yes. That means that most people, or at least most people with a beating heart, have already done the math, added up the arrogance, sadism, stupidity, and denial, and reached the bottom line: a dead planet. Some of us carry that final sum like the weight of a corpse. For others, that conclusion turns the heart to a smoldering coal. But despair and rage have been declared unevolved and unclean, beneath the "spiritual warriors" who insist they will save the planet by "healing" themselves. How this activity will stop the release of carbon and the felling of forests is never actually explained. The answer lies vaguely between being the change we wish to see and a hundredth monkey of hope, a monkey that is frankly more Christmas pony than actual possibility.

Given that the culture of America is founded on individualism and awash in privilege, it's no surprise that narcissism is the end result. The social upheavals of the 60s split along fault lines of responsibility and hedonism, of justice and selfishness, of sacrifice and entitlement. What we are left with is an alternative culture that offers workshops on our "scarcity consciousness," as if poverty were a state of mind and not a structural support of capitalism. This culture leaves us ill-prepared to face the crisis of planetary biocide that greets us daily with its own grim dawn. The facts are not conducive to an open-hearted state of wonder. To confront the truth as adults, not as faux-children, requires an adult fortitude and courage, grounded in our adult responsibilities to the world. It requires those things because the situation is horrific and living with that knowledge will hurt. Meanwhile, I have been to workshops where global warming is treated as an opportunity for personal growth, and no one but me sees a problem with that.

The alternative culture has encouraged a continuum that runs from the narcissistic to the sociopathic. Narcissists don't change. As one set of experts puts it, "Typically, as narcissism is an ingrained personality trait, rather than a chemical imbalance, medication and therapy are not very effective in treating the disorder." Somewhere unarticulated, we all know that. And sociopaths can't change. We know that, too. Which is why no one raises a hand when Derrick asks whether the culture will voluntarily transition to a sustainable way of life.

The word sustainable serves as an example of the worst tendencies of the alternative culture. The word has been reduced to the "Praise, Jesus!" of the eco-earnest. It's a word where the corporate marketers, with their mediated upswell of green sentiment, meshes perfectly with the relentless denial of the privileged. It's a word I can barely stand to use because it's been so exsanguinated by the cheerleaders for the technopic, consumer kingdom come. To doubt the vague promise now firmly embedded in the word—that we can have our cars, our corporations, our consumption, and our planet, too—is both treason and heresy to the emotional well-being of most progressives. But here's the question: Do we want to feel better or do we want to be effective? Are we sentimentalists or are we warriors?

Because this way of life—devouring, degrading, and insane—cannot continue. For "sustainable" to mean anything, we must embrace and then defend the bare truth: the planet is primary. The life-producing work of a million species are literally the earth, air, and water that we depend on. No human activity—not the vacuous, not the sublime—is worth more than that matrix. Neither, in the end, is any human life. If we use the word "sustainable" and don't mean that, then we are liars of the worst sort: the kind who let atrocities happen while we stand by and do nothing.

Even if it was theoretically possible to reach an individual or collective narcissist, it would take time. And time is precisely what the planet has run out of. Admitting that might be the exact moment that we step out of the cloying childishness and optimistic white-lite denial of so much of the left, and into our adult

knowledge. And with all apologies to Yeats, in knowledge begins responsibilities. It's to you grown-ups, the grieving and the raging, that we address this book.

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Ninety-eight percent of the population will do nothing unless they are led, cajoled, or forced. If the structural determinants are in place for them to live their lives without doing damage—like if they're hunter-gatherers with respected elders—then that's what happens. If, on the other hand, the built environment has been arranged for cars, industrial schooling is mandatory, resisting war taxes will land you in jail, food is only available through giant corporate enterprises selling giant corporate degradation, and misogynist pornography is only a click away 24/7, well, welcome to the nightmare. This culture is basically conducting a huge Milgram experiment with us, only the electric shocks aren't fake—they're killing off the planet, species by species.

But wherever there is oppression there is resistance: that is true everywhere, forever. The resistance is built body by body from the other two percent, from the stalwart, the brave, the determined, who are willing to stand against both power and social censure. It is our thesis that there will be no mass movement, not in time to save this planet our home. That two percent in other times has been able to shift both the cultural consciousness and the power structures toward justice: Margaret Mead's small group of thoughtful, committed citizens. It's valid to long for a movement, no matter how much we rationally know that we're wishing on a star. Theoretically, the human race as a whole could face our situation and make some decisions—tough decisions, but fair ones, that include an equitable distribution of both resources and justice, that respect and embrace the limits of our planet. But none of the institutions that govern our lives, from the economic to the religious, are on the side of justice or sustainability. Most of them, in fact, are violently on the side of capital-E Evil. And like with the individually destructive, these institutions could be forced to change. The history of every human rights struggle bears witness to how courage and sacrifice can dismantle power and injustice. It takes bravery and persistence, political intelligence and spiritual strength. And it also takes time. If we had a thousand years, even a hundred years, building a movement to transform the dominant institutions around the globe would be the task before us. But the earth is running out of time. The western black rhinoceros is definitely out of time. So is the golden toad, the pygmy rabbit. No one is going to save this planet except us.

So what are our options? The usual approach of long, slow institutional change has been foreclosed, and many of us know that. The default setting for environmentalists has become personal lifestyle "choices." This should have been predictable as it merges perfectly into the demands of capitalism, especially the condensed corporate version mediating our every impulse into their profit. But we can't consume our way out of environmental collapse: consumption is the problem. We might be forgiven for initially accepting an exhortation to "simple living" as a solution to that consumption, especially as the major

environmental organizations and the media have declared lifestyle change our First Commandment. Have you accepted compact fluorescents as your personal savior? But lifestyle change is not a solution as it doesn't address the root of the problem. As Derrick has pointed out elsewhere, even if every American took every single action suggested by Al Gore it would only reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 21 percent. Aric tells a stark truth: even if through simple living and rigorous recycling you stopped your own average American's annual one ton of garbage production, "your per capita share of the industrial waste produced in the U.S. is still almost 26 tons. That's 37 times as much waste as you were able to save by eliminating a full one hundred percent of your personal waste." Industrialism itself is what has to stop. There is no kinder, greener version that will do the trick of leaving us a living planet. In blunt terms, industrialization is a process of taking entire communities of living beings and turning them into commodities and dead zones. Could it be done more "efficiently"? Sure, we could use a little less fossil fuel, but it still ends in the same wastelands of land, water, and sky. We could stretch this endgame out another twenty years but the planet still dies. Trace every industrial artifact back to its source—which isn't hard as they all leave trails of blood—and you find the same devastation: mining, clear cuts, dams, agriculture. And now tar sands, mountain top removal, windfarms (which might better be called dead bird and bat farms). No amount of renewables is going to make up for the fossil fuel or change the nature of the extraction, both of which are prerequisites for this way of life. Neither fossil fuel nor extracted substances will ever be sustainable: by definition they will run out. And both getting them and using them are literally the destruction of the planet. Bringing a cloth shopping bag to the store, even if you walk there in your global warming flip flops, will not stop the tar sands.

We have believed such ridiculous solutions because our perception has been blunted by some portion of denial and despair. And those are legitimate reactions. I'm not persuading anyone out of them. The question is, do we want to develop a strategy to manage our emotional state or to save the planet?

And we've believed in these lifestyle solutions because everyone around us insists they're workable, a collective repeating mantra of "renewables, recycling" that has dulled us into belief. Like Eichmann, no one has told us that it's wrong.

Until now. So this is the moment when you will have to decide. Do you want to be part of a serious effort to save this planet? Not a serious effort at collective delusion, not a serious effort to feel better, not a serious effort to save you and yours. But an actual strategy to stop the destruction of everything worth loving. If your answer feels as imperative as instinct, then you already know it's long past time to fight. After that, the only question left is: how? And despite everything you've been told by the Eichmanns of despair, that question has an answer. They have insisted that there is no answer, but that's the lie of cowards. Every system of power can be fought—they're only human in the end, not supernatural, not sent by god. Industrial civilization is in fact more vulnerable than past empires, dependent as it is on such a fragile infrastructure of pipelines and overhead wires, on binary bits of data encoding its lifeblood of capital. If we would let ourselves think it, a workable strategy is obvious, and in fact is not very different from the actions of partisan resisters across history.

So, will you think it—that one word: resistance? Will you notice that they've come for our kin of polar bears and black terns, who are right now being herded into the cattle cars of industrial civilization? Will you join the others who are yearning to action? The train can be derailed, the tracks ripped up, the bridge blown down. There is no metaphor here, as any General Officer could tell us. There is a planet being murdered, and there are also targets that, if taken out relentlessly, could stop it.

So think "resistance" with all your aching heart, a word that must become our promise to what is left of this planet. Gather the others: you already know them. The brave, smart, militant, and, most of all, serious, and together take aim. Do it carefully, but do it.

Then fire for all your worth.

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