

The Chronicle (May 2013)

Our readers are invited to present their own reports of what they are paying attention to in the transition from economic-industrial ecological-cultural societies.

Herman Greene – 2052: What Do We Ask of the Future?

I hope for a future that will be good for me, my children and my new grandchild. But I worry. As I am now in the third age of life, I secretly fear economic collapse and loss of social support. I am sometimes caught up in prospects of catastrophe . . . of ecological collapse, of pandemics, of political chaos and the collapse of social systems, of wars both big and small, of the tyranny of the rich and the exploitation of the poor, and of lawlessness on a wide scale. Yet, a child of the '50s, I have never given up on the General Electric, Disneyland wonderworld of the future, this too lies within me. The work that we do through CES is justified on the basis that the primary problem we face is ecological limits and transformative change is needed. What then if humanity can just get by on the course it is on, that we are not approaching some grand cataclysmic finale?

Jorgen Randers book, *2052: A Global Forecast of the Next Forty Years*, paints a picture of a human world of light green change that survives and doesn't dramatically change. Megacities grow larger, wilderness declines further, around 2052 temperature crosses the 2-degree-Celsius-over pre-industrial-level threshold, poverty continues on a large scale, and consumption on the whole increases. The move into cities causes birth rates to decline much more quickly than is conventionally accepted so that population peaks around 2040 at 8.2 billion. Economic growth continues through 2052 but at a declining rate beginning in the 2040s due to a smaller workforce (as population falls and those over 65 increase), weather disruptions, higher resource costs, slower productivity growth as more economic activity shifts to services, and social disruption sometimes caused by gross inequity. Alternative fuels supply 37% of the power by 2052, but fossil fuels continue to provide the majority of power. Global energy use peaks in 2030 and then declines toward 2052 due to greater energy efficiency and the eventual slowing of GDP growth. Disasters occur, but not cataclysm. Beyond 2052, he isn't sure, but he advises people to not teach their children to love the wilderness, but to be satisfied with electronic entertainment and the joys of the city.

Randers bases his forecast on data analysis, interviews with leading thinkers, and his own insights based on lifetime involvement in projecting and thinking about the future. He was a co-author of the 1972 book, *Limits to Growth*, which emphasized the concept of overshoot and collapse. The book called for changes to occur that have not been made. Now he doubts that the really dramatic changes that are needed will be made by 2052, in part because attitudes and cultural values are so slow to change. In year 2100 though, humans will live much more sustainably. The reason? Because that which is unsustainable cannot be sustained. Inevitably humanity's ecological footprint will decline. Satisfaction, if it is to be found, will be in being more, not having more.

This is an unsettling forecast. It is neither wonderworld, nor catastrophe. It is shuffling into the future driven by almost inexorable forces.

There is a salutary function to Randers' book. It gives a clear-eyed picture of where humanity is currently likely headed. It doesn't make up a storyline of techno-optimism or of environmental lamentations and deliverance . . . or doom. His final words to the reader are bittersweet, "Learn to live with impending disaster without losing hope. . . . Even if we do not succeed in our fight for a better world, there will still be a future world. And there will still be a world with a future—just less beautiful and harmonious than it could have been."