

How We Can Save The Planet

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Having recently been on a diet, I can attest to the validity of the comparison Mayer Hillman makes between counting the calories and curbing carbon emissions in his recently published paperback. Both activities demand a personal commitment and an understanding of the impact of excess consumption so that individuals can change their behaviour to achieve the required objective. Hillman's book is an excellent place for individuals to start their quest to become responsible environmental citizens. Understanding the difference we can make is the key to success – as long as people do not believe that they can personally make any difference, it is unlikely that government targets will be met. Ultimately, consumer behaviour will be the final arbiter of whether greenhouse gas emissions will be reduced sufficiently to avert a global climate change catastrophe. Like Hillman, I do not hold the view that technological advances on their own will do the trick – indeed, the danger is that the slow development of environmental technologies, such as hydrogen, merely offer false, early hopes which lull us into complacency. Hydrogen is too far off to be helpful now.

The solution Hillman proposes is to ration carbon emissions on a per capita basis, and for those rations to submit to the rule of contraction and convergence, so that emissions are reduced year on year, and eventually for each individual around the globe, converge at the same sustainable level. Such a proposal is socially as well as environmentally just, being predicated on the irrefutable logic that no human is born with a greater entitlement to pollute than any other, whether or not they can afford an SUV.

The fairness agenda has to be central to tackling global warming – we have to recognise that profligate energy use is a moral issue when the consequences are so dire for poorer peoples. But how does one set about convincing the western public that an energy diet is good for them? Doesn't such a prospect spell political suicide?

I don't think so. The alternatives are all politically worse (if we rule out the "let's leave this till later" option). Carbon taxes have been mooted, but like all environmental taxes are likely to be unpopular. The bitter after taste of the fuel protests, combined with the increasing costs of fossil fuels make it difficult to see how any government could significantly raise duties without a self-defeating backlash. The voluntary approach (eg Defra's "Are You Doing Your Bit" campaign) was widely seen to have failed. Without a critical mass of people participating, others often lose interest.

We are also witnessing a more concerted opposition to technological solutions such as wind power, the mainstay of the Government's alternative energy policy. It never pays to ignore the impact that nimbysism has on demolishing consensus around the greater good.

Carbon rationing, combined with a trading scheme, provides a way forward. Indeed, the Government and the European Union have long accepted that carbon emissions trading schemes work, and the roll-out of the EU ETS in January is testament to that.

Would an ETS for the general public work? I don't see any reason why not, and my ten minute rule bill on domestic tradable quotas is the first attempt to provide a



legislative glimpse of how such a scheme might work. Going back to the analogy with dieting, the concept of controlling one's energy intake is well established, and food products are now sold with an abundance of information on the label to guide the consumer. Dieting clubs like Weightwatchers provide easy-to-follow guides to help calculate the impact a certain product will have on the waistline. Calories (kcal) are no more mysterious than kg CO₂.

Using the tables in *How We Can Save The Planet* makes it easy to find out how much we each contribute to global warming. UK households are responsible for over 24mt CO₂ equivalent each year. Given that global emissions are said to be around 6 billion tonnes – one tonne for each of us – it is easy to see how disproportionate western energy use is. The earth's capacity to absorb greenhouse gases is about 3 billion tonnes a year. This is the longest suicide note in history.

If we act now, the worsening crisis could be ameliorated if not totally averted. But some people say it's already too late. Hillman has tried to anticipate the arguments of the fatalists and those who would indulge in displacement activities. But unless we start fleshing out what we mean by "everybody must do something" it will be very difficult indeed to take any more political speeches on the environment very seriously. *How We Can Save The Planet* should at the very least be mandatory reading for all those who write such speeches.

Reference

How We Can Save the Planet, Mayer Hillman with Tina Fawcett, Penguin Books, 2004, 195p, ISBN 0-141-01692-2, £7.99 (PB)