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Save the Planet or Save Humankind?

Understanding the Real Priority of Sustainability Is Paramount

REGENERATION | ECOLOGICAL RESILIENCE | SUSTAINABILITY



Save the Planet or Save Humankind?

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Save the Planet or Save Humankind?



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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*



Introduction

When discussing sustainability, it may seem odd to begin with a quote from Charles Dickens, but few openings better capture the paradox of the present moment. By nearly every measurable indicator of human well-being, this is the most prosperous era in history. Yet, at the same time, the ecological systems that make this prosperity possible are under increasing strain. Understanding this paradox is critical. It reveals not just a crisis of sustainability, but a crisis of framing and attitude, which may help explain why progress on sustainable initiatives has been slower than the effort and data would suggest. Ultimately, sustainability has been framed incorrectly for years. It is not actually about saving the planet because we cannot influence or stop solar flares, black holes, rogue asteroids, or any other cosmic threats that could harm our world.

Sustainability is and always has been about the effort to try to save humankind from its own destructive, pollutive tendencies. Sustainability is about allowing us to continue living within the required environmental margins and guardrails for living and thriving on this planet. We risk not only the sustainability movement but also our very longevity as a species, if we do not understand the stakes and take the necessary steps to preserve the fragile balance of the ecosystem that we require. Traditional sustainability focuses on reducing harm and doing less damage to the environment. But that's no longer enough. We need to do better.





1.

The Best of Times

By historical standards, humanity is thriving and on a parabolic upward trajectory. Today may be the best time to be born a human being for various reasons. Here are just a few:

- **Longer, Healthier Lives:** More people live longer, healthier lives than at any point in history. Average global life expectancy has more than doubled since 1900, rising from thirty-two years to over seventy-one years today (Roser et al. 2023). Advances in vaccines, sanitation, antibiotics, and chronic disease treatment have dramatically improved survival. Even many low-income countries now have better health outcomes than wealthy countries did a century ago. mRNA vaccines, AI-assisted diagnostics, CRISPR gene therapies, robotic surgery, and personalized medicine are transforming care. Many illnesses that were once death sentences are now manageable or curable.





- **Unprecedented Access to Information and Technology:** Humanity has more access to information, knowledge, and technology than ever before. Roughly 74 percent of the world's population used the internet in 2025, representing nearly 6 billion people. Smartphones have enabled a profound digital transformation, providing unprecedented access to education, communication, banking, healthcare, and employment tools for billions of people. Access to schooling, online education, and digital resources has expanded dramatically. AI and automation are expanding productivity and democratizing access to knowledge, making information less limited by traditional institutional and geographic barriers. Global literacy rates now exceed 86 percent (UNESCO 2022). As a comparison point, in 1900, the global literacy rate barely exceeded 20 percent, meaning that only roughly 300 million people worldwide could read and write out of a total of about 1.6 billion.
- **Greater Material Security and Opportunity:** Billions now have better housing, food security, education, and economic opportunity. In 1820, most humans lived in extreme poverty. Today, global extreme poverty has fallen below 10 percent, despite substantial population growth (World Bank 2023; Roser and Ortiz-Ospina 2017). More than 1.5 billion people have escaped extreme poverty since 1990. Access to electricity, clean water, and infrastructure has also improved substantially. More than 90 percent of the world's population now has access to electricity while water treatment, sanitation, and transport systems have dramatically improved global living conditions (World Bank 2022).

Taken together, these data show that while global elites have long enjoyed significant advantages, the average human being has never had greater access to safety, connectivity, medical advances, and opportunity than today. That's great news and something to celebrate.

However, the bad news is that all this wonderful progress has come at an ecological cost we are only now beginning to understand.



2.

The Worst of Times

One of the modern world's greatest challenges is not that life is worse than at any point in the past, but instead ensuring these truly amazing, unprecedented gains are sustainably maintained for future generations. Ensuring these gains is one area where we, as a species, are failing.

To understand how we are failing future generations, we can look to the Stockholm Resilience Center and the work it has done to understand how our planet functions. The Stockholm Resilience Centre's planetary boundaries framework provides one of the clearest lenses through which to understand that cost. The framework identifies nine critical Earth system processes that regulate the stability of the planet, including climate change, biodiversity loss, land use, and biogeochemical cycles (Rockström et al. 2009).

The Stockholm Centre's central thesis is simple: Human activities are pushing Earth beyond its safe operating space for people to enjoy living on it in the long term. We face a future where we must acknowledge that human activity may be the cause of the next great planetary mass extinction, of which humans will be part, with the cause of that extinction stemming from the impact of current human economic activity.



The data show that our planet's natural resilience is weakening: Global warming is accelerating, climate volatility is increasing, ecosystems are degrading, and warning signs of tipping points are emerging in key systems (Stockholm Centre 2026).

We have entered a new era for planet Earth—one where human activity is beginning to dominate the future of the environment. Our carbon footprint is having a direct, measurable impact on worldwide biological and ecological systems. This is a fact, not fear-mongering.

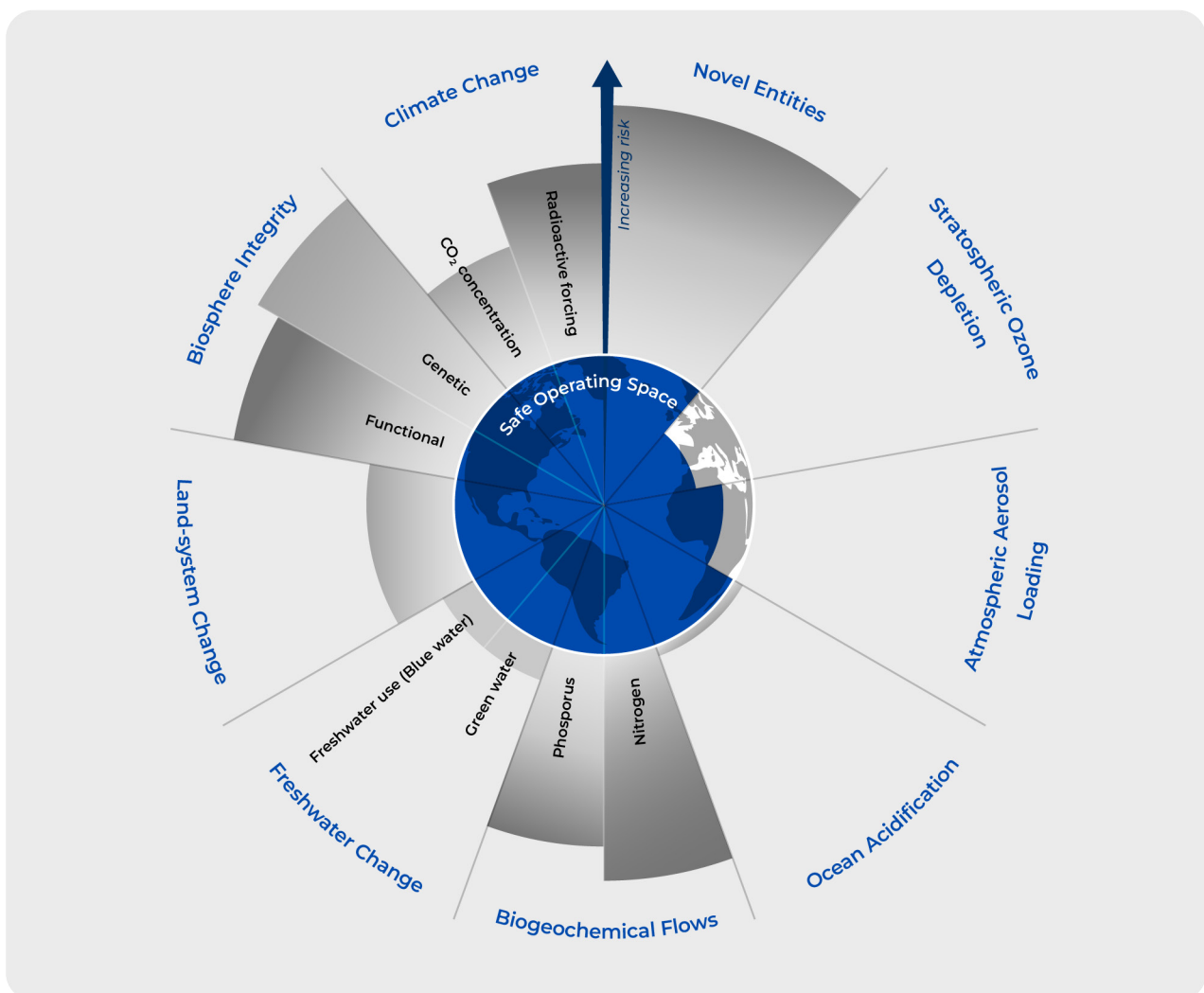


Figure 1. The graphic represents the 2025 update to the Planetary Boundaries.
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Source: "Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre," Based on Analysis in Sakschewski and Caesar et al. 2025



Combining insights from many fields of research, the Stockholm Centre's framework highlights nine global change processes through which human activities affect the global environment. To safeguard the Earth's resilience and stability, we must move back within its planetary boundaries. Planetary boundaries are quantitative assessments of the safe limits for human pressure on these nine critical processes. They are the scientifically defined guardrails that ensure the Earth's health. If we stay within them, then the Earth remains our dependable home. However, if we breach them, we risk irreversible damage to our very own life support system. As of 2026, seven of the nine identified planetary boundaries have been crossed.

To make matters worse, crossing these boundaries increases the risk of generating large-scale, abrupt, or irreversible environmental changes. The impacts of these changes will not necessarily be immediate or drastic, but together, the boundaries mark a critical threshold for risks to societies and the biosphere we count on.

It is worth noting that the planetary boundaries are interdependent: action that affects one process in the planetary boundaries framework will affect the risks associated with the other processes. The boundaries must therefore be considered collectively in any decision-making on sustainability. Only by respecting all nine boundaries can we maintain the safe operating space for humanity on Earth in the longer term.





“

Save the planet?! There is nothing wrong with the planet. **THE PLANET IS DOING GREAT!** Been through all kinds of things worse than us: been through earthquakes, volcanoes, plate tectonics, continental drifts, solar flares, sunspots, magnetic storms, the magnetic reversal of the poles, hundreds of thousands of years of bombardment by comets and asteroids and meteors, worldwide floods, tidal waves, worldwide fires, erosion, cosmic rays, recurring ice ages... The planet will be here for a long, long, LONG time after we're gone and it will heal itself; it will cleanse itself cause that's what it does.

George Carlin



3.

Solving the Problem

Assuming we are not an inherently suicidal species, something must be done. But what? The modern sustainability movement has been around for the last fifty years or so, but in the context of the continued environmental and biodiversity damage caused by humankind, the movement is failing. It is important to take a look at sustainability, and the people involved with it, and ask some tough questions. Why is it failing? What is the point of “sustainability”? What is the problem we are trying to solve? Are we trying to save ourselves or save the planet? The answer matters.

Mr. George Carlin’s rant is designed to amuse, but like all good comedy, it contains kernels of truth that are important for us as a species to face if we are serious about our longevity and continued existence. One important lesson is that any sustainability effort that purports to “save the planet” is grossly missing the mark. The planet does not need us to save it. The purpose of the sustainability movement needs to be reframed and messaged as the necessary recalibration of economic activity to ensure abundance for humans while also making sure the planet remains habitable for us to continue living on.



Framing the problem correctly matters because it ensures that we solve the root cause rather than the symptoms, preventing wasted resources on irrelevant solutions. It defines the scope, aligns stakeholders, and unlocks innovative, high-value outcomes by focusing efforts on the right questions. Properly framed problems clarify what success looks like, directly impacting effectiveness.

- **Prevents Misaligned Solutions:** Poorly framed problems lead to tackling symptoms, wasting time and money.
- **Identifies Root Causes:** It forces a deeper analysis, often revealing that the initial perception of the problem was wrong.
- **Aligns Stakeholders:** A well-defined problem creates a shared vision, ensuring teams are working toward the same goal.
- **Sets Strategic Scope:** It clearly defines boundaries—what is included and what is not—making projects more manageable.
- **Enables Innovation:** It allows for “out-of-the-box” thinking by broadening the perspective on what is actually being asked.

Research in behavioral economics shows that how a problem is framed directly influences how people respond to it (Tversky and Kahneman 1981). When sustainability is framed as an abstract effort to “save the planet,” it can feel distant, ideological, or even optional. When it is framed as preserving the conditions necessary for human survival and prosperity, it becomes immediate, practical, and unavoidable.

Arguably, much of the pushback against sustainability has been because the issue has been framed incorrectly. It is not, nor has it ever been, about saving the planet. Not really. Saving the planet is a fool's errand we can never hope to do. The new accurate message needs to be this: Sustainability is about saving humankind. Sustainability is about ensuring future generations are able to live in a world of abundance and continued prosperity on this planet, and therefore, sustainability is ultimately about regeneration.



4.

From Sustainability to Regeneration

Underlying this conceptual misframing is a broader misunderstanding of how natural systems operate. Many economic models implicitly assume a linear trajectory of depletion—that resources are consumed and ultimately exhausted. This assumption reflects a simplified interpretation of entropy, applied beyond its appropriate context.

To go a step deeper, a persistent barrier to embracing regenerative, sustainable economics is actually not technological, political, or financial—it is philosophical. Many people unconsciously pessimistically assume that the world is destined for decline, and this is in part because of the popularity and cross-pollination of the scientific idea of entropy.





It's hard to pinpoint exactly where or when entropy entered mainstream thought, but a potential entry is in Issac Newton's foundational work, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, published in 1687 (Newton 1687). In that work, Newton discusses the movement of planets and how to calculate them, involving revolutionary ideas about kinetic energy and how it is gained and lost. Once people began to realize the importance of energy in physics, they began to extrapolate these concepts to various academic fields and areas. Nearly 180 years after Newton, the formal concept and term entropy were introduced by scientist Rudolf Clausius in 1865 in regard to thermodynamics. These days, entropy has a prominent voice and relates to everything: political movements, mathematics, economic production inputs, biological longevity, and more. Entropy is a powerful concept with many applications.

As it specifically applies to sustainability, having a worldview rooted in entropy as a metaphor for social and economic systems suggests that resources inevitably deplete, ecosystems inevitably degrade, and human prosperity can or must ultimately come at the expense of nature.

It's a subtle bias few might realize they have, but this assumption strongly shapes economic behavior and outcomes. If decline is inevitable, then the rational strategy is unfettered extraction, fast and first. The result is a self-fulfilling cycle: systems designed for depletion produce depletion. The famous phrase "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" applies here. It's interesting to consider the poet who wrote those words, Robert Herrick, who lived from 1591 to 1674, around the time of Newton (Herrick 1648).

Yet this worldview misunderstands how natural systems actually function. While entropy governs closed systems, the Earth is not closed; it is an open system powered by solar energy and governed by multiple regenerative processes. Nature does not collapse toward disorder—it actually cycles toward balance. Birth, growth, decline, and death are part of a cycle that repeats, not one that ends. To put it in geometric terms, nature is a circle, not a line.

Biological and ecological systems are defined by renewal. Forests regrow after fires, soil rebuilds through organic processes, and ecosystems recover when pressures are removed.



As mentioned earlier, the Earth has gone from fiery, barren hellscape to verdant land to frozen, barren snowball and back to verdant land repeatedly over millions of years. Regeneration is not an exception; it is the operating principle of life on Earth. Appreciating this fact is essential. It reveals that sustainability is not about sacrifice; it is about aligning human systems with the regenerative logic that already sustains life.

Yet despite nature's regenerative capacity, human systems often operate as if regeneration does not exist. This is evident in what might be termed "ecological economic overshoot," which is the condition in which human demand exceeds Earth's ability to regenerate resources. Today, most of the world's population lives in countries operating in ecological overshoot, and in many cases, that overshoot is in overdrive. This imbalance is not a natural inevitability; it is the result of economic systems improperly designed for linear extraction rather than circular renewal.

The entropy mindset manifests in economics and finance as short-term profit over long-term resilience, resource depletion rather than resource stewardship, and the externalization of environmental costs. You only need to read news headlines to see proof of this on a daily basis. This mindset treats nature as a warehouse rather than a living system, with dangerous consequences for the living things on the planet.

A growing body of research and policy recognizes that economic systems must align with ecological regeneration to sustain long-term prosperity. Regenerative economic frameworks aim for net-positive impacts by restoring environmental, social, and economic systems simultaneously (Walls 2023). Similarly, regenerative business models are designed to create value across multiple stakeholders, including ecosystems, while promoting planetary health and societal well-being (Konietzko et al. 2023). This aligns with broader concepts of a regenerative economy, which emphasize the continuous renewal of ecosystem functions and integration of human systems with natural systems (Plessis and Brandon 2015; Morselleto 2020, as cited in "Towards Defining a Regenerative Economy," 2024).

In parallel, research on circular and regenerative systems demonstrates that restoring ecosystems and ecosystem services is central to long-term economic resilience and sustainable resource management (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2023).



These approaches contribute to the emergence of a “nature-positive” economy, defined by global policy institutions as one that restores biodiversity, enhances ecosystem resilience, and supports sustainable socioeconomic development (UNEP and UNDP 2021).

Together, this body of work reflects a clear shift: long-term prosperity depends not on extraction but on the regeneration of natural systems. The belief that the world must decline is not a law of nature—it is a story we have told ourselves. Nature demonstrates a different truth: systems endure through renewal, balance, and adaptation.

Sustainability typically fails when framed as sacrifice. It succeeds when framed as alignment with the economic motive to drive revenues and profits alongside the regenerative processes that sustain life. The choice before humanity is not between prosperity and the planet, and it never was. It is between an entropy-driven economy that depletes its own foundation and a regenerative economy that builds lasting wealth. Nature has already shown us the path. The question is whether we are willing to follow it and have the wisdom to do so.

Earth is not a closed system. It is powered by continuous energy inputs—primarily from the sun—and governed by regenerative processes. This regenerative capacity may not be infinite, but it is fundamental. It means that sustainability needs to pivot to a movement about maintaining the conditions under which regeneration can occur.

All this is to suggest that the next evolution of sustainability is not merely a new label but a new orientation and a new alignment. Traditional sustainability focuses on reducing harm and doing less damage to the environment. Regenerative approaches go further, aiming to restore and enhance ecological systems. This shift has important implications for business, such as moving from linear supply chains to circular systems, investing in nature-based solutions, and aligning incentives with long-term resilience rather than short-term extraction. These changes are not purely ethical; they are strategic. They position organizations to operate within the constraints of a finite but regenerative system.



5.

The Three Tasks Ahead

The sustainability debate has long been wrongly framed as a moral obligation: What are we willing to give up to save the planet? That framing is no longer sufficient. The reality is far more pragmatic and far more urgent. Our planet does not require saving. It will persist, adapt, and regenerate as it always has, long after humanity has faded. What is at risk is not the Earth, but the narrow set of ecological conditions and environmental processes that make human life (and human abundance and prosperity) possible in the first place.

This distinction changes everything. When sustainability is about saving the planet, it becomes abstract, ideological, and too easy to ignore. But when sustainability is about preserving the conditions that allow civilization to exist and thrive, it becomes immediate, economic, and unavoidable. The challenge before us is not one of awareness. We already understand the problem. It is one of alignment.



If the sustainability movement is to truly succeed, there are three tasks ahead of us. We must align our economic systems with the regenerative processes that govern the natural world. We must align incentives with long-term resilience rather than short-term extraction. We must align our definition of progress with the capacity to sustain and expand human prosperity within the boundaries of the systems that support it.

The bottom line is that there is no need for a retreat from sustainability. But there is a strong need for yet another evolution of it. The next era for humans on Earth must not be defined by how much we extract but by whether we succeed in realigning sustainability to focus on the future and evolving our economies according to regenerative principles.





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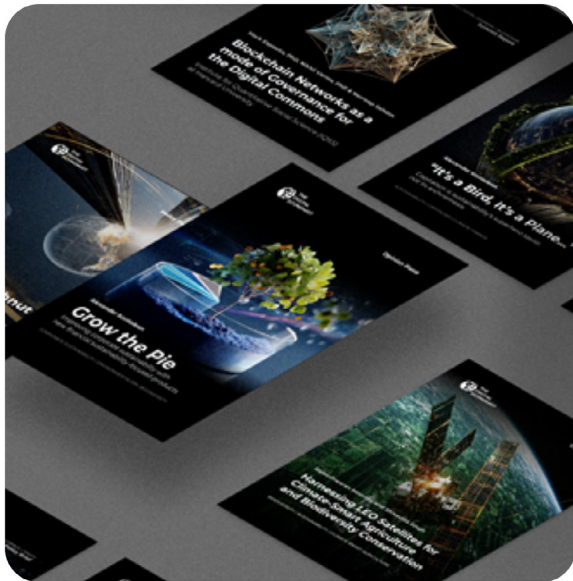
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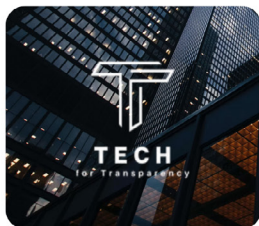
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