

Life is Uncertain: Get Used to It*

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The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty.

Ursula Le Guin

Would we listen to nature if our lives depended on it?

Derrick Jensen

Life is uncertain – eat your dessert first.

Ernestine Ulmer

In the early part of the 21st century, substantive action on reducing greenhouse gas emissions was delayed because some politicians were using the idea of uncertainty in science as a justification for delayed action. Of course, science is a probabilistic endeavor based on hard data (persuasive evidence). Rarely will scientists claim they are certain about a particular outcome. However, all of life is uncertain – politicians may not live up to their campaign promises, the global financial meltdown shocked people who believed the free market was self regulating, all too many people found their "secure" jobs were not secure and their house would not appreciate in value at 10% annually, climate change reduced the global agricultural productivity, and some corporations (e.g., General Motors) needed government financial aid to survive. In short, the "secure" civilization turned out to be far less secure than anyone expected. Tsunamis and wildfires have shown that nature has greater "control" than people thought. Arguably, above all, the reduction in agricultural productivity, when the human population is still growing exponentially, can no longer be ignored or be based on greenhouse gas reduction plans with dates like 2020, 2025, or 2050. Finally, positive feedback loops could release greenhouse gases from the frozen hydrated methane in the ocean depths or locked up in the permafrost, putting the global climate system beyond human control. The fear that these things might happen should not prevent taking action now.

Humankind has delayed action on all global problems far too long, but the interactive problems must be addressed now with concrete action. Talk and world conferences have not led to major or even significant remedial action, but this situation is no excuse for inaction now. Of course, even if atmospheric carbon dioxide is reduced to 350 ppm, risk should be reduced for runaway climate change. Too much time has been spent doing nothing about reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

By using uncertainty to delay action on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, uncertainty about the climate of the future has been increased at least an order of magnitude. "Business as usual" increases the risks, increases the cost of remedial action, and increases uncertainty about the future climate. Life is full of uncertainty, and some remedial action may provide enormous benefits. Why wait?