

Global warming can't buy happiness

The pursuit of more isn't better when it means choking our planet to death.

By Bill McKibben

BILL MCKIBBEN is a scholar in residence at Middlebury College and author of "Deep Economy: the Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future."

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EARLIER THIS MONTH, a draft White House report was leaked to news outlets. The report, a year overdue to the United Nations, said that the United States would be producing almost 20% more greenhouse gases in 2020 than it had in 2000 and that our contribution to global warming would be going steadily up, not sharply and steadily down, as scientists have made clear it must.

That's a pretty stunning piece of information — a hundred times more important than, say, the jittery Dow Jones industrial average that garnered a hundred times the attention. How is it even possible? How, faced with the largest crisis humans have yet created for themselves, have we simply continued with business as usual?

The answer is, in a sense, all in our minds. For the last century, our society's basic drive has been toward more — toward a bigger national economy, toward more stuff for each of us. And it's worked. Our economy is enormous; our houses are enormous. We are (many of us quite literally) living large. All that more is created using cheap energy and hence built on carbon dioxide — which makes up 72% of all greenhouse gases.

Some pollutants, such as smog, decrease as we get richer and can afford things like catalytic converters for our cars. But carbon dioxide consistently tracks economic growth. As Harvard economist Benjamin Friedman concluded last year, CO₂ is "the one major environmental contaminant for which no study has ever found any indication of improvement as living standards rise." Which means that if we're going to cope with global warming, we may also have to cope with the end of infinite, unrestrained economic expansion.

That sounds gloomy, but maybe not. New data suggest that we've been flying blind for many decades. We made an assumption — as a society and as individuals — that more was better. It seemed a reasonable bet, and for a while it may have been true. But in recent years economists, sociologists and other researchers have begun to question that link. Indeed, they're finding that at least since the 1950s, more material prosperity has yielded little, if any, increase in humans' satisfaction.

In the 1990s, for instance, despite sterling economic growth, researchers reported a steady rise in

"negative life events." In the words of one of the study's authors, "The anticipation would have been that problems would have been down." But money, as a few wise people have pointed out over the years, doesn't buy happiness. Meanwhile, growth during the decade increased carbon emissions by about 10%.

Further, economists and sociologists suggest that our dissatisfaction is, in fact, linked to economic growth. What did we spend our new wealth on? Bigger houses, ever farther out in the suburbs. And what was the result? We have far fewer friends nearby; we eat fewer meals with family, friends and neighbors. Our network of social connections has shrunk. Do the experiment yourself. Would you rather have a new, bigger television, or a new friend?

Rebuilding those communities will be hard work — and it will start by rebuilding local economies, so that we actually need our neighbors again. Consider, for instance, food. Farmers markets are the fastest-growing part of our food economy as people discover the joys of being a "localvore." Some of those joys are culinary — fresh food tastes better, you eat with the flow of the seasons and so on. But some of those joys are emotional, too. Academics who followed shoppers found that those in farmers markets had 10 times as many conversations as those in supermarkets.

And here's what's interesting. Local food also uses about 10 times less energy than food shipped around the globe.

If we're going to do anything about that endless flow of carbon that's breaking our planet, we're also going to have to do something about our broken communities. Not just by preaching about neighborliness but by rebuilding the web of economic relationships that grows from farmers markets, or effective public transportation, or an energy grid that relies on your rooftop solar panels and my backyard windmill as much as it relies on some central power station.

More and better don't lie in the same direction anymore. And that's good news, at a moment when good news is scarce.

