

Increasing Our Creation Care Pledge by Two Percent Per Year

Paul Barten

Wangari Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, devoted her life to the protection, restoration, and stewardship of the Earth. She embodied the unifying vision, integrity, selfless dedication, humility, empathy, and personal courage rarely, if ever, seen in leaders. Born and raised in rural Kenya, she attributed her unwavering conservation ethic directly to the nurturing of the people, soil, water, gardens, fields, and forests of her homeland. She also credited the timeless cultural tradition of storytelling to help people—especially children—understand and appreciate the gifts of the Creator. One story she frequently referenced centered on a tiny hummingbird and an enormous forest fire. Please click on this two-minute video link to see and hear her tell it firsthand (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-btl654R_pY).

I think it is only natural to be discouraged and feel powerless when facing global challenges as vast and formless as climate change and environmental degradation. At our most optimistic times, we have the hopeful, intuitive sense that with a shared vision, bold actions, and effective leadership these seemingly insurmountable challenges could be met and overcome. We also recognize that it will take decades to stop then reverse the cumulative effects of two centuries of industrialization, pollution, habitat loss, population growth, and increased per capita consumption of just about everything. Unfortunately, this daunting state of affairs seems to inspire little more than hapless waiting. Clearly, our inaction can only make matters worse (e.g., wasting energy and food, buying single-use plastics, limited recycling, sending yard waste to the landfill, etc.).

In practical terms, passively waiting for some extraordinary leader to: (1) galvanize broad-based public support, (2) muster the required financial, scientific, technical, and human resources, and (3) energize the process is a poor bet. Thankfully, remarkable leaders have appeared from time to time (e.g., Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Dr. Maathai) in response to controversial, complex, and unsustainable conditions. Parallels are being drawn between our current circumstances and other tumultuous periods of U.S. and world history. It follows that we can set the stage for new leaders by demonstrating our commitment to environmental stewardship. Accepting personal responsibility is the antidote to that American affliction noted in a memorable letter of resignation by the first Secretary of Energy (1974-77), James R. Schlesinger — “We have only two modes, complacency and panic.” He offered this candid assessment after receiving little or no support for the obvious actions proposed in the immediate aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis. Very limited progress has been made on 45-year-old recommendations for fuel economy standards and renewable energy investments. This is especially maddening in relation to enormous, missed opportunities to mitigate climate change and improve public health and safety.

The historical record usually shows that substantive change (environmental, social, political, cultural, etc.) begins at the grassroots “bottom up” level with compelling reasons, determined actions, and a willingness to learn by doing. Creative individuals, families, small groups of friends and neighbors, small rural communities, close-knit urban neighborhoods, and distinctive regions with common concerns, shared values and diverse skills rise to challenge and seize opportunities. Their initial actions may escape notice, but with perseverance and growing participation, the positive environmental, social, and economic outcomes become plainly evident and self-reinforcing. Wearyed by apathetic or selfish people, vacuous promises, and trite slogans, these 2% per year people and groups dedicate themselves to care of the Earth and the common good.

Sample

2% Per Year List

1. Reusable shopping bags
2. Drive rationally
3. Don’t “burn” electricity
4. Be frugal
5. Active Hope
6. Diligent recycling
7. Abhor food waste
8. Trees!
9. Composting
10. Fix things
11. A “Green” lawn
12. ...to be determined

At some point in time, often years or decades later, the work and dedication of fledgling grassroots movements attract attention. This brings higher levels of government, and other people and organizations who either support *or* reject substantive change to a decisive fork in the road. In the early 1900s, President Theodore Roosevelt took the road less traveled to withdraw almost 200 million acres from the public domain and establish National Parks and National Forests for “the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run.” During the Great Depression of the 1930s, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt recognized the urgent need and strategic opportunity to address massive unemployment (of young men and World War I veterans) and the enormous backlog of overdue work on parks, forests, historic sites, and eroded farmland. He signed the Act creating the Civilian Conservation Corps ten days after his inauguration. At his direction, the US Army and US Forest Service opened the first of more than 2,000 CCC Camps one month later. In contrast, the Hoover Administration (1928-32) did little more than hope the inter-related environmental and economic problems would, in effect, miraculously disappear.

To me, the most impressive example of all, and a major inspiration for the 2% per year premise of this series, is the non-governmental Green Belt Movement (est. 1977). For

decades, with very limited financial resources, Wangari Maathai led at the grassroots level by mobilizing, educating, and supporting thousands of women in rural communities across Kenya. Many years later she was elected to parliament (in 2002 with a 98% plurality in national elections), after which she simultaneously led from the “bottom up” and the “top down.” Dr. Maathai and the Roosevelts were so effective because their vision, determination, and actions were equal to the enormous challenges they faced. Recent efforts have been uninspiring because we lack the sense of common purpose and urgency their leadership embodied. We also tend to artificially compartmentalize social, political, economic, and environmental initiatives instead of deliberately integrating them as done by the Green Belt Movement. Our limited or piecemeal efforts fail to acknowledge “The economy is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the environment, not the other way around.” (2002, Senator Gaylord Nelson, Wisconsin, and a founder of Earth Day). Incrementalism and cosmetic efforts also squander time and resources. They deceive the people into thinking the problem will be eventually be solved or the challenge will be met. To make matters worse, they anesthetize public opinion and divert resources to nonsensical and counterproductive initiatives and usury special interests (e.g., “Clean coal,” the Alberta tar sands and the Dakota Access Pipeline, bottled water in “bioplastic,” and other inane activities, instead of investing in 21st century utility-scale renewable energy and many other worthy projects).

Progress

Everyone always talks about progress,
But what actually is progress?

It certainly is not increasing quantity,
Increasing numbers, increasing damage.

Progress, as I see it, represents an increase
in quality: increasing our knowledge,
our understanding, our joy.

It is certainly not increasing the size
of our cars, the number of rooms
we do not use in our homes,
the amount of food we throw away.

What, then, does progress mean?

The answers are in the lessons of nature.
The truly important things are the
struggle for survival and the protection
of our children and grandchildren.

Margaret Sam-Cromarty, 2000
Cree Poems and Stories
Lettreplus, Hull, Quebec

Astute political leaders (and their staffs and advisors) eventually recognize the need to directly serve their constituents. At some point, the groundswell of public opinion, noteworthy grassroots success, and growing inertia in relation to the “new” [now decades-old] problem can no longer be ignored or denied at the state or federal level. However belated, this top-down leadership can rapidly accelerate change, lead to sweeping reforms, and launch overdue major initiatives. If political leaders and actions are sincerely motivated by common cause with their constituents, so much the better.

Some readers will remember the painfully slow lead up to the passage of the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, and other major environmental laws in the 1970s, then the impressive improvements in water quality, air quality, and public health that followed in the 1980s. Of course, “sooner is better than later” for comprehensive large-scale initiatives, but individual and grassroots efforts are the vitally important catalysts. They are the “pebble in society’s shoe” (Canon Michael DeVine), the growing audience for objective media outlets, and the subject of mounting stacks of compelling evidence, new ideas and active dissemination in publications and documentary films.

Simply put, the only thing the historical record forecasts with certainty is the necessity for someone to go first. As Margaret Mead said in 1978, “Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Basic history texts and superficial documentaries often give outsized credit to the political leaders and other luminaries who capitalized on one or two generations of grassroots initiative, dedication, creativity, and perseverance. But, when all is said and done, who cares? The sooner we start, the sooner local, regional, national, and international progress can occur ...lasting progress for all.

The Earth’s grateful response to meaningful changes in our values, attitudes, and behaviors—from **ambivalent, complacent, and damaging** ...to **engaged, concerned, and restorative**, respectively—can be rapid and inspiring. The web of life can be repaired and strengthened by our efforts. The remarkable resilience of ecosystems can be actuated by our care, and the multiplier effect of environmental restoration can quickly emerge. This, in turn, induces more people and more organizations to learn, grow, and act ...and to appreciate and enjoy the results.

I hope this summary and perspective, coupled with the examples presented in this series, inspire you to look for ways to care for this fragile Earth, our island home—God’s gift to all living things. It seems to me that a Creation Care pledge of **two percent per year** is a sustainable goal and a very modest place to start. So, I appeal to you to join me in honoring Wangari Maathai’s verdant legacy and our obligations to future generations. Let us all do the very best we can. We will be tithing by 2025.

