

# Greta Thunberg on the climate delusion: ‘We’ve been greenwashed out of our senses. It’s time to stand our ground’



Illustration: Nicolás Ortega/The Guardian

Governments may say they’re doing all they can to halt the climate crisis. Don’t fall for it – then we might still have time to turn things around

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**Greta Thunberg**

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Maybe it is the name that is the problem. Climate change. It doesn't sound that bad. The word "change" resonates quite pleasantly in our restless world. No matter how fortunate we are, there is always room for the appealing possibility of improvement. Then there is the "climate" part. Again, it does not sound so bad. If you live in many of the high-emitting nations of the global north, the idea of a "changing climate" could well be interpreted as the very opposite of scary and dangerous. A changing world. A warming planet. What's not to like?

Perhaps that is partly why so many people still think of climate change as a slow, linear and even rather harmless process. But the climate is not just changing. It is destabilising. It is breaking down. The delicately balanced natural patterns and cycles that are a vital part of the systems that sustain life on Earth are being disrupted, and the consequences could be catastrophic. Because there are negative tipping points, points of no return. And we do not

know exactly when we might cross them. What we do know, however, is that they are getting awfully close, even the really big ones. Transformation often starts slowly, but then it begins to accelerate.

## **Wildfires, hurricanes, heatwaves, floods ... The weather seems to be on steroids, and natural disasters appear less and less natural**

The German oceanographer and climatologist Stefan Rahmstorf writes: “We have enough ice on Earth to raise sea levels by 65 metres – about the height of a 20-storey building – and, at the end of the last ice age, sea levels rose by 120 metres as a result of about 5C of warming.” Taken together, these figures give us a perspective on the powers we are dealing with. Sea-level rise will not remain a question of centimetres for very long.

The Greenland ice sheet is melting, as are the “**doomsday glaciers**” of west **Antarctica**. Recent reports have stated that the tipping points for these two events have already been passed. Other reports say they are imminent. That means we might already have inflicted so much built-in warming that the melting process can no longer be stopped, or that we are very close to that point. Either way, we must do everything in our power to stop the process because, once that **invisible line has been crossed**, there might be no going back. We can slow it down, but once the snowball has been set in motion it will just keep going.



Illustration: Nicolás Ortega/The Guardian

“This is the new normal” is a phrase we often hear when the rapid changes in our daily weather patterns – wildfires, hurricanes, heatwaves, floods, storms, droughts and so on – are being discussed. These weather events aren’t just increasing in frequency, they are becoming more and more extreme. The weather seems to be on steroids, and natural disasters increasingly appear less and less natural. But this is not the “**new normal**”. What we are seeing now is only the very beginning of a changing climate, caused by human emissions of greenhouse gases. Until now, Earth’s natural systems have been acting as a shock absorber, smoothing out the dramatic transformations that are taking

place. But the planetary resilience that has been so vital to us will not last for ever, and the evidence seems to suggest more and more clearly that we are entering a new era of more dramatic change.

Climate change has become a crisis sooner than expected. So many of the researchers I've spoken to have said that they were shocked to witness how quickly it is escalating. But since science is very cautious when it comes to making predictions, maybe this should not come as a big surprise. One result of this, however, is that very few people actually knew how to react when the signs started becoming obvious in recent years. And fewer still had planned how to communicate what is happening. It seems like the vast majority of people were preparing for a different, less urgent scenario. A crisis that would take place many decades into the future. And yet here we are. The climate and ecological crisis is not happening in some faraway future. It's happening right here and right now.

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f everyone lived like we do in Sweden, we would need the resources of 4.2 planet Earths to sustain us. And the climate targets set in the **Paris agreement** would be but a very distant memory – a threshold that we would have crossed many, many years ago. The fact that 3 billion people use less energy, on an annual per capita basis, than a standard American refrigerator gives you an idea of how far away from global equity and climate justice we currently are.

The climate crisis is not something that “we” have created. The worldview that largely dominates the perspective from Stockholm, Berlin, London, Madrid, New York, Toronto, Los Angeles, Sydney or Auckland is not so prevalent in Mumbai, **Ngerulmud**, Manila, Nairobi, Lagos, Lima or Santiago. People from the parts of the world that are most responsible for this crisis must realise that other perspectives do exist and that they have to start listening to them. Because when it comes to the climate and ecological crisis – just like most other issues –

many people living in rich economies still act as if they rule the world. By using up the remains of our carbon budgets – the maximum amount of CO<sub>2</sub> we can collectively emit to give the world a 67% chance of staying below 1.5C of global temperature rise – the global north is stealing the future as well as the present. It is stealing not only from its own children but, above all, from those who live in the most affected parts of the world, many of whom are yet to build much of the most basic modern infrastructure that others take for granted. And still this deeply immoral theft does not even exist in the discourse of the so-called developed world.



Greta Thunberg at a school strike protest in Sweden in September. Photograph: EPA

Saving the world is voluntary. You could certainly argue against that statement from a moral point of view, but the fact remains: there are no laws or restrictions in place that will force anyone to take the necessary steps towards safeguarding our future living conditions on planet Earth. This is troublesome from many perspectives, not least because – as much as I hate to admit it – Beyoncé was wrong. It is not girls who run the world. It is run by politicians, corporations and financial interests – mainly represented by white, privileged,

middle-aged, straight cis men. And it turns out most of them are terribly ill suited for the job. This may not come as a big surprise. After all, the purpose of a company is not to save the world – it is to make a profit. Or, rather, it is to make as much profit as it possibly can in order to keep shareholders and market interests happy.

This leaves us with our political leaders. They do have great opportunities to improve things, but it turns out that saving the world is not their main priority, either.

Approaching the issues of the climate and ecological crisis inevitably involves confronting numerous uncomfortable questions. Taking on the role of being the one who tells the unpleasant truth, and thereby risking one's popularity, is clearly not on any politician's wishlist. So they try to stay clear of the subject until they absolutely cannot avoid it any longer – then they turn to communication tactics and PR to make it **seem as if real action is being taken**, when in fact the exact opposite is happening.