



# The Future is Here and It is Bright: What Are We Waiting For?

By Gary Hirshberg

# *It strikes me as odd that climate change is finally breaking news.*

My professors were exposing the first warnings by climate scientists when I was in college over 30 years ago. The scientific community has been trying to talk about the climate crisis for decades. We've had plenty of data. So what's been missing? Will power.

We need more than simple awareness to break our generations-old, fossil-fuel-induced stupor. We have known what we should do, but we clearly have not done it. And the situation has deteriorated because of our lack of action.

And now, the world's scientists agree we must take swift and definitive action on all fronts in the next decade (the next 10 years!) to have a chance at averting a mid-century, worst-case scenario. The fight against climate change is now the mother of all environmental causes. If the earth becomes plagued by droughts, famines, floods, forest fires and Katrina-size storms, other causes simply won't matter. Leaving all of the human tragedies aside, the economic disruption will be catastrophic. When I hear some say, as my US Senator has for the last six years, "we need to just wait and see," I can't conceive of what additional evidence they're waiting for. It's here, and it's time to get serious.

**So, why haven't we done just that? And what will it take to make real changes in our society?**

As George Bernard Shaw once said, “Virtue is insufficient temptation.” Our planet will not be saved by preaching principles and exerting moral suasion. After more than three decades spent working in the environmental movement, I am convinced that economic self-interest—whether it is achieved by saving, earning, or a combination of the two—is the most powerful, if not the *only*, force capable of bringing about the future we need in time to make a difference to the well-being of Mother Earth.

And even though all the talk about greening is music to my ears, I will readily concede that the guilt-tripping admonitions about changing light bulbs and lowering thermostats feel like a less-than-effective salve for what ails us. Hearing these sirens reminds me of a line uttered by my favorite philosopher, Lily Tomlin, who says, “No matter how cynical I get, it’s hard to keep up.”

While I am deeply sympathetic to the psychological hurdles such incremental steps toward sustainability present, I am also a deep believer in the power of one to make a difference. The wonderful late Anita Roddick said it this way: “Anyone who believes he is too small to make a difference has never been in bed with a mosquito.” But, 30-plus years after committing myself to being useful to the planet and 25 years after starting in business, I’ve come to a few hard-headed conclusions:

1. It’s going to take a lot more than moral rectitude and virtuous principles to set us on a truly sustainable path.
2. Commerce is the most powerful force on the planet; it got us into this mess and is the only force strong enough to get us out.
3. Most problems exist because commerce has not made solving them its priority.
4. Only when the solutions to our environmental problems are accompanied by profitable, commercial strategies for enacting them will the business world shift priorities to reduce their climate and environmental footprints. And finally,
5. Individual consumers have the power to expedite that shift.

There is no doubt that one of the great contributors to environmental degradation is our excessive consumption, particularly in the United States. Experts have estimated that if everyone on the planet consumed energy, water, and natural resources at the rates Americans do, we'd need three Earths to sustain us. Clearly, any rational steps to shrink our environmental and climate footprints must begin with reductions in consumption. As the adage goes, we need to reduce first; then reuse what we've had to consume; and then recycle what we have consumed but cannot reuse.

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But the reality is that even after we have cut our consumption, we will still consume. And that is my topic here. **How we consume makes all the difference.**

I truly believe how we shop and invest changes the world. Conscientious consumption of goods that have lower environmental footprints sends a powerful message to the businesses that produce them (and the ones that don't). By rewarding those companies' efforts to reduce their resource use, we can wield enormous power. American businesses spend many hundred of millions of dollars on market research to learn about our consumption choices; these findings are the nectar that fuels them. And as the data comes back that large numbers of us want less waste, less toxins, and more renewable resources used in the production of goods, the changes will follow.

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The world I work in—the organic food business—is very much about the environment. Organic farmers don't spray their crops with toxic and persistent pesticides or chemical fertilizers. Their practices help to keep contaminants out of our soils, rivers and drinking water. And because organic farming pays relatively well, it keeps family farmers in business, which means fewer farms sold to developers and fewer natural habitats destroyed. I believe passionately in taking care of the earth. But it so happens that what's good for the planet right now is also good for business.

**Let me illustrate from my own experience.**

At Stonyfield Farm, the conservation improvements we've made over the years have saved us millions of dollars. We started years ago by insulating our pipes, and we found that it produced a payback in just a few months. We also weather-stripped doors and installed more energy-efficient windows. We installed energy-efficient lighting. We built an enormous refrigerated cooler insulated twice as well as other similar coolers. Even from the more costly improvements, we saw returns on our investments in less than two years, even in the '80s when energy prices weren't anywhere near as high as they are today.

A few years ago, we eliminated the plastic lid on our small yogurt cups and replaced it with a foil lid. This packaging innovation alone has kept tons and tons of waste out of landfills and saves us more than a million dollars a year. We've recently installed a wastewater treatment system that actually generates some of the energy it uses. And we're currently installing a system that will recapture some of the heat going up our boiler stacks so that we can use that energy to heat water, instead of letting it escape into the atmosphere—better for both the earth and our bottom line. These are just some of the green improvements that have saved our company so many millions of dollars that I've come to think of us as the “First National Bank of Conservation.”

In addition to our savings from reducing materials and waste, the other half of our story is that we've derived substantial profits by generating consumer loyalty and increased sales. When we started out, conventional wisdom would have had us dumping tons of money into advertising to generate brand awareness and encourage trial and consumer loyalty. Instead, we invested heavily in our products: great tasting organic yogurts that are good for the earth and good for people. Our investments didn't leave much money for advertising, so we had to come up with creative and affordable ways to market ourselves. In the process, we discovered that just teaching our yogurt lovers about our environmental practices made them love us almost as much as our yogurt.

# We stand in subway and bus stations early in the morning handing out free yogurts and smoothies, and thank people for being good to the planet by taking mass transit....

One of our marketing methods is to use the lids on our yogurt cups to talk about the environmental causes that drive our company and to invite people to visit our website to learn more. We create a new lid message every month and 155 million people read these messages each year. Once they get to our website, people find tons of information about conservation, energy efficiency, organic farming, organic foods, and other environmental topics. Our lid messages generate a huge amount of web traffic. Our site receives more than 30,000 visits per month, which is more visits than any other yogurt company site receives, and more than most other food company sites receive. These visits have helped us to build a large mailing list of over a quarter of a million for our consumer newsletters.

We also use a lot of community marketing to get the word out. We go to fairs, festivals, concerts and sporting events to tell people about our environmental mission and to give out samples of our yogurts and smoothies. We stand in subway and bus stations early in the morning handing out free yogurts and smoothies, and thank people for being good to the planet by taking mass transit instead of driving a car.

Today, we're a \$300 million dollar company; the country's number-three yogurt brand and the world's leading organic yogurt company. Stonyfield has grown by more than 24% annually over the last 18 years, 4-6 times faster than the yogurt category itself, and yet we've done almost no advertising. That's the power of a brand built largely around environmental responsibility.

Of course, we're not the only company founded on environmental responsibility. Within the last year, even the world's largest company has begun to turn green into green. Wal-Mart has become the world's largest buyer of organic cotton, the top seller of organic milk, and a retailer of many other organic foods. Wal-Mart is creating tremendous demand for organic production, and this is a great thing for organics and a great thing for the earth. Wal-Mart has also recently made environmental improvements to its supply chain. And you can believe that Wal-Mart's hard-nosed leaders aren't supporting sustainable agriculture and making conservation improvements just because they think it's the morally correct thing to do. With a yearly gross of \$315 billion, Wal-Mart is nothing if not savvy about making money. The Wal-Mart folks may feel good about doing business that's good for the earth, but you can be sure they're in it for the bottom line.

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A few years ago, General Electric introduced its more energy efficient and environmentally friendly product and service line, “Ecomagination.” GE recently announced 2006 Ecomagination sales revenues of \$17 billion. Last fall, DuPont announced a new, heightened effort to develop sustainable products and services from which they expect to boost revenues by \$6 billion or more by 2015. IBM has just announced its “Project Big Green,” a billion-dollar-a-year investment meant to make data centers worldwide more energy-efficient. This spring, even Fox News owner Rupert Murdoch joined the fight against climate change with a pledge to make his news empire carbon neutral and to convince his hundreds of millions of viewers and readers to join the climate cause. Murdoch said that taking action to fight climate change “is simply good business.”

A growing number of companies will soon compete to prove who’s doing more to reduce their climate impact. There will be dollars at stake because they’ll be motivated by the power of the purse—consumer power. The idea of harnessing that power led me to gather a group of colleagues and activists to help start a new non-profit organization, Climate Counts ([www.climatecounts.org](http://www.climatecounts.org)). Climate Counts annually scores companies—so far 56 companies in eight major consumer sectors—on the basis of their voluntary action to reverse climate change. The new Climate Counts Company Scorecard—launched in June 2007—helps people make climate-conscious purchasing and investing choices and urge the world’s best-known companies to take the issue of climate change seriously. We firmly believe everyday consumers can be the most important activists in the fight against global warming as the world’s largest companies compete fiercely for their dollars.

With the Climate Counts Company Scorecard, almost every purchase you make can be looked at in a new light. Has the company that made it earned your purchasing “vote” by focusing on climate change as much or more than you do? Is the company truly worthy of your business? Do its values reflect your values? When we are all asking these questions, companies listen. Our individual actions may *seem* inconsequential, but taken collectively they can be a powerful force for good.

Fighting climate change is, of course, everyone’s business. But business is powered by all of us, and so our everyday purchases can leverage huge impacts. If 100,000 typical Americans were to sign up for clean power, it’d be the equivalent in reducing CO2 emissions of taking 200,000 cars off the road. But if just 100 of the largest companies were to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by just 5%, it’d be like taking 25 million cars off the road. That’s a lot of light bulbs.

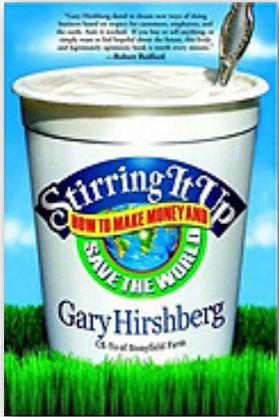
For about a hundred years we’ve unconsciously burned fossil fuels and sent our exhaust up into the atmosphere to a mythical place called “away.” We’ve been able to just flick a switch and get instant energy, heat, and light, with no need to consider the consequences. But now it’s time for us to consider the consequences, and to take different actions.

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There is no doubt that businesses will all inevitably have to reduce use of polluting and nonrenewable energy sources. Rising fossil fuel prices, carbon taxes and other market forces will all get us there before long. But the future is here now, and we can clearly see that there is no more time to waste. So the next time you buy something, let the seller know that these issues matter to you, and that you prefer to purchase from companies that are genuinely trying to make a difference. You'll hasten the inevitable, feel good about your actions, and you just might save the world.

**My little company started almost 25 years ago with seven cows and a leaky barn, but has become the world's largest organic yogurt maker. If we can do that, then I guess anything is possible. 🌱**

# info



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gary Hirshberg is the president and CE-Yo of [Stonyfield Farm](#), the world's largest producer of organic yogurt, and Board Chair of [Climate Counts](#). The recipient of five Honorary Doctorates and numerous awards for his commitment to environmental causes, he lives with his wife and three teenage yogurt-eaters in New Hampshire.

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