

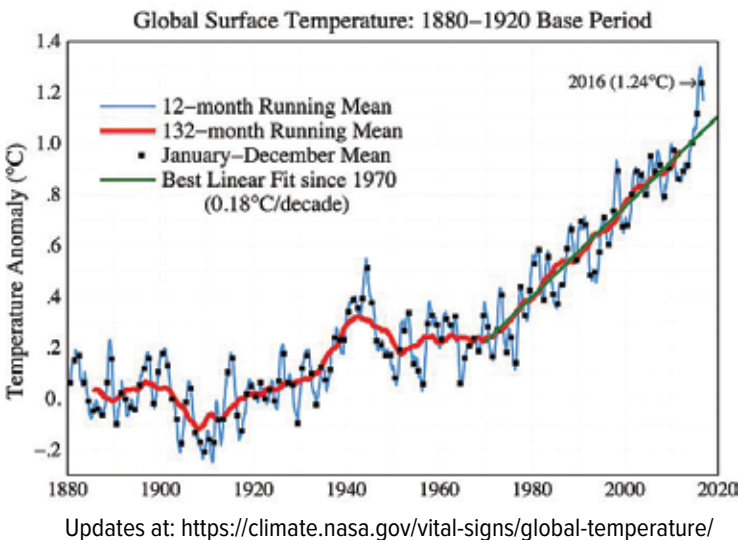
# Feel the Burn?

## Reading *Drawdown* and Global Co-operation

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

Increasingly, climate change is recognized as “an existential question”—it threatens our very existence. Even mid-range warming scenarios, periodically updated, look catastrophic. It appears that without rapid and radical change, society as we now experience it will be impossible in many locations by as early as 2050. Every day, human activities are belching more carbon dioxide (and other gases grouped under the term) into the atmosphere—this already has launched climate disruption and resulting social upheaval.

See the accompanying chart for an illustration of the trends—remember that Centigrade-scale temperature increases are nearly doubled when reported in Fahrenheit. Then take in this statement by Jason Mark in the July 2017 issue of the Sierra Club periodical, *Sierra*: “It’s an open secret among climatologists, policy experts, and environmental campaigners that staying within a global 2-degree [Centigrade] temperature rise is all but impossible, barring some technological or political revolution.”



Replacing this deadly system requires describing unsustainable and unjust practices, identifying systemic causes, and identifying regenerative practices and shared improvements—then mobilizing for change. It is an interrelated set of challenges, and its complexity is actually part of the problem.

Advocates of practical and cooperative solutions can benefit from two new books—one a best-seller and one little-known—informed by very different perspectives, but both focused on how to build a survivable future.

From *Corporate Globalization to Global Co-operation* is a short but substantial book by Tom Webb, with a title that indicates its topical evidence and argument. Webb is well known in the cooperative world, has contributed to this magazine, and was a founder of the Saint Mary’s University (Halifax, N.S.) master’s program in management of co-ops and credit unions. In eight chapters Webb surveys the interrelated global crises; critiques the destructive, investor-driven system at the heart of it; and reviews

the ethical and pragmatic reasons why cooperatives offer an alternative.

In *Drawdown*, edited by Paul Hawken, a large group of researchers and writers focuses on the global climate crisis. They have produced an encyclopedic review, concise and aided by fine photos, of 80 proven techniques that reduce emissions—and, in a much smaller number of cases, that provide active sequestering (drawdown) of atmospheric carbon. The *Drawdown* collaborators estimate the various impacts if humans were to expand each of these practices between now and year 2050. Some are surprising, and many are low-tech—involving such factors as empowering girls and women to reduce population pressures; expanding and protecting forests for their multiple benefits; and improving soil management and soil carbon retention.

### Examining unpleasant realities

Of course, overheating is only one reason global civilization cannot last in its current form. Webb’s book lays bare the many problems resulting from the dominance of neo-liberal economic doctrines and large corporations whose primary purpose is increased investor earnings. Before a stark review of the interrelated global crises in his opening chapter, Webb warns that, “If we do not have the courage to examine our unpleasant realities, then there is little hope for our children and grandchildren. Hope grows out of courage. Without courage there can be no real hope.”

Much about these realities is known—but much is being denied. The world is already in ecological overshoot, consuming unsustainably, and its population continues to increase. A mass extinction of species is well underway, and the human species is dependent on a diverse ecology. Fresh water and topsoil are also being depleted more than replenished.

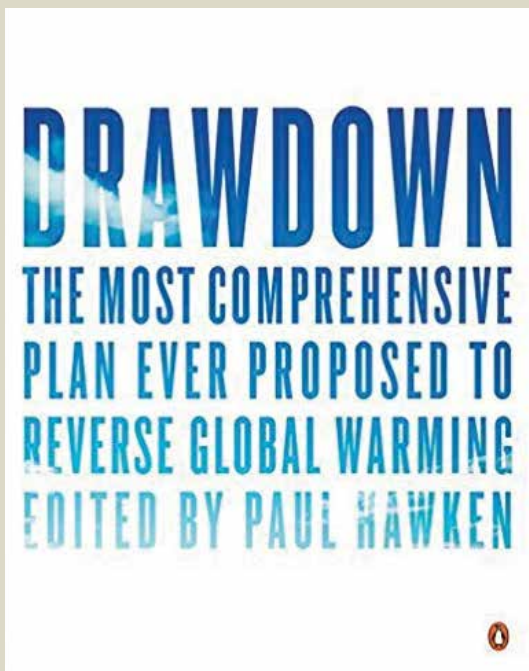
Global warming is accelerating; the oceans have recently been found to be absorbing more warmth than previously estimated; and ocean acidification threatens entire ecosystems. Additionally, according to a recent World Economic Forum report, under present trends by 2050 the ocean will contain more plastic than fish.

The fossil fuels at the core of this “way of life” cost more and more to produce, diminishing the producers’ financial viability—and by extension that of our economy. In fact, because of this *unaffordability* (the core of peak oil argument) and the likelihood of “stranded assets” presently invested in fossil fuels, the highest projections of carbon emissions may never occur. But that takes us beyond 2050.

Despite techno-utopian reviews, many alternative fuels are either too expensive or otherwise unavailable. Conventional economic doctrine theorizes a substitution of materials, but that doesn’t readily apply to gas and especially petroleum, embedded as they are in nearly every manufacturing process including “renewables.” At one point even the *Drawdown* narrative slips into the common but major error of conflating electricity generation/use with total energy (it’s less than 25 percent).

### It’s all interrelated

Webb, in a characteristically passionate tone, notes that the richest 1 percent of the population owns almost 50 percent of the global wealth and adds, “It might well be argued that this incredible inequality represents the most glaring evil in our world.” Wealth inequality is extremely high in



*Drawdown*, ed. Paul Hawken  
2017, Penguin Books (New York City),  
[www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com) (Paperback, 240 pp.)

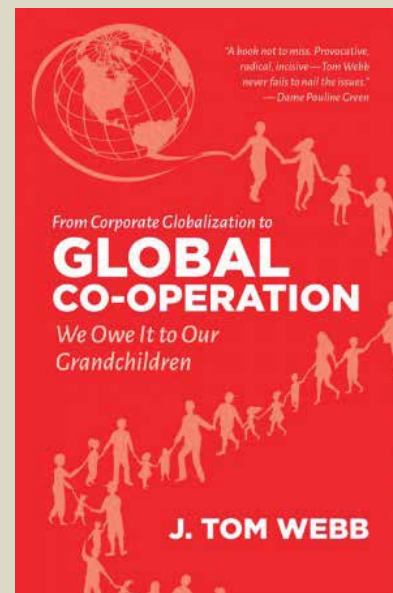
the U.S., social mobility is extremely low, and formal democracy has been hollowed out by financial and business interests that have long dominated its politics.

However, notes Webb, all this disastrous dysfunction is interrelated, and we cannot say that income inequality is of greater importance than climate change. “What links these trends is capitalism and the investor-owned, capital-driven corporation. Any reasonable, rational reflection on the prospects for our environment and for human society clearly concludes that making the creation of wealth the overriding focus of our economic thinking is a recipe for disaster.”

Webb devotes a chapter to “myths of neoclassical economics” and is convinced that capitalism must be superseded or transformed, or else it will destroy human society and the natural world that we are deeply dependent upon. In the second half of his book, Webb emphasizes cooperative ethics and potential cooperative solutions to many social needs.

*Drawdown* is subtitled, “The most comprehensive plan ever proposed to reverse global warming.” It is an impressive project by a large group of staff, research fellows, and essayists offering peer-reviewed science and diverse, informed contributions. Editor Hawken has previously written several books, including *The Ecology of Commerce* (1993) and *Blessed Unrest* (2007)—the latter a tribute to the global network of groups working to protect natural resources.

As the chief authors at the Drawdown Initiative acknowledge, the book is not really a plan. (Find this ongoing collaborative and its research at



*From Corporate Globalization to Global Co-operation*, by J. Tom Webb  
2016, Fernwood Publishing (Nova Scotia and Winnipeg),  
[www.fernwoodpublishing.ca](http://www.fernwoodpublishing.ca) (Paperback, 180 pp.)

[www.drawdown.org](http://www.drawdown.org).) *Drawdown* stays focused on multiple ways to modify carbon emissions and promote carbon sequestration. It reviews and extrapolates from methods that are working and can be scaled up to help avoid catastrophe. *Drawdown* offers no large plan or critique, rather an outlook that favors local participation and entrepreneurial initiatives.

Hawken concludes *Drawdown* with “An Opening” and this suggestion: “The logical way to read this book is to use it to identify how you can make a difference.”

### Big questions—and the big club

It’s hard to fault an innovative, well-designed, and encyclopedic survey, both peer-reviewed and inspiring, for not doing more. But *Drawdown* does not help us answer questions such as: How will we mobilize for social repurposing? How will we manage the enormous political and financial capital formation needed? How will we achieve a transformation of industrial agriculture to a cleaner and plant-based diet? What will be the consequences of these huge shifts in a complex and interdependent economy? Other impacts may hinder scaling up conservation practices to the levels the book projects.

Among the eight broad sections in *Drawdown*, readers who are especially interested in soil, farming, and forestry will encounter some of the most important examples of emissions reduction. In addition, practices in these areas are essential for carbon sequestration or drawdown. As a reminder, it is necessary not merely to slow emissions but to reverse their

buildup by 2050. Photosynthesis is all we have at present that is certain to work (as Hawken himself reiterates in a 5/10/2017 interview at Vox.com)—high-tech sequestration methods are expensive and ineffective.

Some enthusiastic readers commenting on *Drawdown* have demonstrated its moral hazard in offering a long list of projected improvements, few of which seem to require significant political struggle or economic tradeoffs, although these are occasionally mentioned. The book provokes comments such as this: “A deeply peer reviewed, fully win-win, nearly no-regrets pathway...” But the real world is never fully win-win and without doubt will continue to offer plenty of regrets.

What is the largest missing piece in *Drawdown*, according to Hawken (in that same interview) as well as this reviewer? War. War is unmeasured but is likely the biggest carbon emitter of all. In our self-anointed exceptional nation, the military complex is the number one source not only of global warming gases but also of earthbound toxic wastes. U.S. climate agreement “goals” are not merely unenforceable and dependent upon merely hypothesized sequestration technologies. They are fraudulent because they do not even include or measure the military’s carbon emissions.

We not only have resource and capital limits pressing upon us, presenting difficult choices, but also major financial and corporate forces with different agendas than ours. As George Carlin said, “It’s a big club, and you and I ain’t in it.” Survival for these powerful groups does not depend on increased sharing of health and wealth—but ours does.

### Notes on “pessimism” and “optimism”

None of the necessary changes is impossible—even that essential but elusive element, political will. As Tom Webb states, we need courage to face today’s world, and courage is the foundation of real hope. On the other hand, understating the problems likely will lead to inadequate solutions or unfounded hopes.

However, if you suggest looking clearly at certain threats to our society and want to discuss that, you will encounter a lot of resistance. When you describe already evident, dangerous trends, you may be thought too pessimistic. If you want to take the discussion further, you need courage and honesty—but it also helps to offer examples and arguments highlighting workable projects and collective action.

An interesting debate has arisen in the context of these threatening trends: what motivates people to act, what leads them to change their behavior in response to increased risk? Some say that to emphasize

disturbing projections is counterproductive, that it is paralyzing rather than catalyzing. But there is no persuasive case that most people in the developed world—having heard about resource limits and impending crises for some years—have not responded because the message has been too pessimistic or scary. Positive directions, both national and local, have been proposed and debated for many years, but these have often been dismissed as requiring people to do with less “convenience” and therefore are said to be nonstarters. Many people find it is indeed hard to change and easier just to hope for the best.

On the other hand, a significant minority has responded to perceived threats with attempts at education, changed behavior, and support of radical change. But public and corporate leaders and most of the populace, by not responding meaningfully, have allowed the trends to worsen.

However, remember who sponsors most media and media conversations. Fundamental to denial and procrastination, and perhaps the strongest influence on public policy and opinions, are corporate interests. Propaganda to deny or confuse the real trends dates to the 1970s and continues today. Corporate front groups and “tobacco science” are where much of climate denial originates.

Furthermore, contrary to arguments for soft-pedaling the climate crisis, information on serious threats or shocking injustice often does move people to personal change and/or radical action. Examples on a personal health level: threats from cigarette smoking, STDs, and breast cancer. On a different front, recall heartening examples of popular mobilization against imminent threats of war or environmental degradation.

Activists need not be resigned to a dismal future. Hawken’s book is for those who want to understand and act now in ways that expand their impact and reduce carbon emissions. Webb’s book may help some readers understand that forms of ownership, and the principles and values behind them, are fundamental to achieving the kind of society we want.

In Part 2, I’ll return to *Drawdown* and *Global Co-operation* and also point to additional resources for reading, for online viewing, and for mobilizing popular forces. Meanwhile, updating positive actions focused on the climate crisis, see [www.drawdown.org](http://www.drawdown.org) and [www.climatecollaborative.com](http://www.climatecollaborative.com).

On prospects for cooperative economies, see [www.democracycollaborative.com](http://www.democracycollaborative.com). For those venturing well beyond denial, see the latest from Richard Heinberg: “Are we doomed? Let’s have a conversation”: <http://bit.ly/2tPvxfU>. Finally: look within! □

## Cooperative Grocer

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