

Newsletter of OMNI350
GLOBAL WARMING: Consumption v. Population!
Mistaken Assumptions

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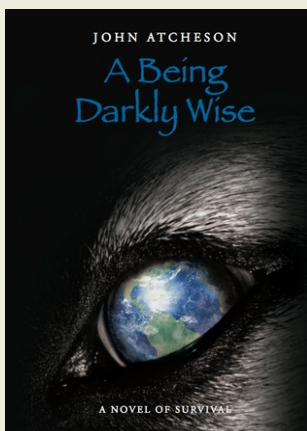
350: THE MOST IMPORTANT NUMBER YOU NEED TO KNOW

The mission of OMNI 350 (formerly the Climate Change Task Force) is to educate Arkansans about current realities of climate change and to take actions to prevent further harm to the atmosphere. OMNI 350 is committed to actions that lead to the reduction of green house gases to a scientifically safe level of 350 parts per million of Carbon Dioxide(CO2) in the atmosphere through life-style and legislative change, which includes partnering with like-minded organizations.

In This Issue

THE GREAT UNMENTIONABLE

Book Review



[The Great Unmentionable](#)

Posted: 12 Apr 2013 07:54 AM PDT

We have offshored both our consumption and our perceptions

By George Monbiot, published on the Guardian's website, 12th April 2013

Every society has topics it does not discuss. These are the issues which challenge its comfortable assumptions. They are the ones that remind us of mortality, which threaten the continuity we anticipate, which expose our various beliefs as irreconcilable.

Among them are the facts which sink the cosy assertion, that ([in David Cameron's words](#)) "there need not be a tension between green and growth."

At a reception in London recently I met an extremely rich woman, who lives, as most people with similar levels of wealth do, in an almost comically

Excellent Pre-

Apocalyptic Novel: A

Being Darkly Wise

By [Joe Romm](#) on Apr 6, 2013 at 12:25 pm

Climate Progress book reviewer John Atcheson has his own book out available in paperback and Kindle from Amazon, [A Being Darkly Wise: A Novel Of Survival](#).

I don't get much time to read fiction these days, but I do follow post-apocalyptic novels, like [The Hunger Games](#) and, the ebook sensation, *Wool*. Atcheson's book, while every bit as compelling a page turner as those, is a somewhat different category, which might be called pre-apocalyptic fiction.

Here's one of the many 5-star reviews on Amazon:

Ingredients: one part diary of a Washington insider, one part introductory science textbook, one part love story, one part wilderness guide, and one part scary-as-hell thriller. Mix well, serve on ice. Enjoy.

I have to admit, I was initially skeptical of this book; climate change, while terrifying, doesn't readily lend itself to the adventure/thriller genre. However, Atcheson is so deft at weaving together the various threads of his story that I was almost halfway through the book before coming up for air. Even now, after a re-reading, I'm simply amazed at the range of emotional levers that Atcheson is able to pull: righteous anger at the do-nothing Washington establishment, sadness

unsustainable fashion: jetting between various homes and resorts in one long turbo-charged holiday. When I told her what I did, she responded, "oh I agree, the environment is so important. I'm crazy about recycling." But the real problem, she explained, was "people breeding too much".

I agreed that population is an element of the problem, but argued that consumption is rising much faster and - unlike the growth in the number of people - is showing no signs of levelling off. She found this notion deeply offensive: I mean the notion that human population growth is slowing. When I told her that birth rates are dropping almost everywhere, and that the world is undergoing a slow demographic transition, she disagreed violently: she has seen, on her endless travels, how many children "all those people have".

As so many in her position do, she was using population as a means of disavowing her own impacts. The issue allowed her to transfer responsibility to other people: people at the opposite end of the economic spectrum. It allowed her to pretend that her shopping and flying and endless refurbishments of multiple homes are not a problem. Recycling and population: these are the amulets people clasp in order not to see the clash between protecting the environment and rising consumption.

In a similar way, we have managed, with the help of a misleading global accounting system, to overlook one of the gravest impacts of our consumption. This too has allowed us to blame foreigners - particularly poorer foreigners - for the problem.

When nations negotiate global cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, they are held responsible only for the gases produced within their own borders. Partly as a result of this convention, these tend to be the only ones that countries count. When these "territorial emissions" fall, they congratulate themselves on reducing their carbon footprints. But as markets of all kinds have been globalised, and as manufacturing migrates from rich nations to poorer ones, territorial accounting bears ever less relationship to our real impacts.

While this is an issue which affects all post-industrial countries, it is especially pertinent in the United Kingdom, where the difference between our domestic and international impacts is greater than that of any other major emitter. The last government boasted that this country cut greenhouse gas emissions by 19% between 1990 and 2008. It positioned itself (as the current government does) as a global leader, on course to meet its own targets, and as an example for other nations to follow.

But the cut the UK has celebrated is an artefact of accountancy. When the impact of the goods we buy from other nations is counted, our total greenhouse gases did not fall by 19% between 1990 and 2008. **They rose by 20%**. This is despite the replacement during that period of many of our coal-fired power stations with natural gas, which produces roughly half as much carbon dioxide for every unit of electricity. When our "consumption emissions", rather than territorial emissions, are taken into account, our proud record turns into a story of dismal failure.

There are two further impacts of this false accounting. The first is that because many of the goods whose manufacture we commission are now produced in other countries, those places take the blame for our rising consumption. We use China just as we use the population issue: as a means of deflecting responsibility. What's the point of cutting our own

over love lost, excitement over new romantic interests, an intense desire to go fly-fishing, and plain-old fear.

Simply put, **this is a must-read not only for those interested in climate change. This is a book for anyone who likes a nail-biting, keep-you-up-all-night, hold-your-breath-until-you-turn-blue type of thriller. Count me among those eagerly anticipating the sequel.**

I have known Atcheson for 20 years now, since my first weeks at the US

Department of Energy in mid-1993. I actually read one of the early drafts of this book back then and was very much impressed at how improved this book is now that he is edited out the uber-wonky parts and streamlined the action. Yes, the author has been working on this book for two decades!

I must say that as much as I enjoyed the post-apocalyptic novels, *The Hunger Games* and *Wool*, the former seems to think its young audience simply won't be interested in more than a brief paragraph on how we got in this mess (and *Wool* seems to rather pointedly rule out global warming as the cause of the ruination).

Atcheson's pre-apocalyptic novel does a very good job of smoothly integrating in the climate science with the page-turning narrative in a non-preachy fashion. In a decade or two at the most - and then perhaps for centuries to come - climate change will be a major element in fiction just as it will become a dominant force in all of our lives.

Reading [A Being Darkly Wise](#) will put you at the

consumption, a thousand voices ask, when China is building a new power station every 10 seconds (or whatever the current rate happens to be)?

But, just as our position is flattered by the way greenhouse gases are counted, China's is unfairly maligned. [A graph published](#) by the House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee shows that consumption accounting would reduce China's emissions by roughly 45%. Many of those power stations and polluting factories have been built to supply our markets, feeding an apparently insatiable demand in the UK, the US and other rich nations for escalating quantities of stuff.

The second thing the accounting convention has hidden from us is consumerism's contribution to global warming. Because we consider only our territorial emissions, we tend to emphasise the impact of services - heating, lighting and transport for example - while overlooking the impact of goods. Look at the whole picture, however, and you discover (using the Guardian's carbon calculator) that manufacturing and consumption is responsible for [a remarkable 57%](#) of the greenhouse gas production caused by the UK.

Unsurprisingly, hardly anyone wants to talk about this, as the only meaningful response is a reduction in the volume of stuff we consume. And this is where even the most progressive governments' climate policies collide with everything else they represent. As Mustapha Mond points out in *Brave New World*, "industrial civilization is only possible when there's no self-denial. Self-indulgence up to the very limits imposed by hygiene and economics. Otherwise the wheels stop turning".

The wheels of the current economic system - which depends on perpetual growth for its survival - certainly. The impossibility of sustaining this system of endless, pointless consumption without the continued erosion of the living planet and the future prospects of humankind, is the conversation we will not have.

By considering only our territorial emissions, we make the impacts of our escalating consumption disappear in a puff of black smoke: we have offshored the problem, and our perceptions of it.

But at least in a couple of places the conjuring trick is beginning to attract some attention.

On April 16th, [the Carbon Omissions site](#) will launch a brilliant animation by Leo Murray, neatly sketching out the problem*. The hope is that by explaining the issue simply and engagingly, his animation will reach a much bigger audience than articles like the one you are reading can achieve.

(**Declaration of interest (unpaid): I did the voiceover*).

On April 24th, the [Committee on Climate Change](#) (a body that advises the UK government) will publish a report on how consumption emissions are likely to rise, and how government policy should respond to the issue. I hope this is the beginning of a conversation we have been avoiding for much too long. How many of us are prepared fully to consider the implications?

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bleeding edge - literally - of this emerging trend.

Quick Links

[350PPM ARCHIVES](#)

[Citizens Climate Lobby](#)

If you want to join the fight to save the planet, to save creation for your grandchildren, there is no more effective step you could take than becoming an active member of this group." - [Dr. James](#)

[Hansen](#), Physicist, member National Academy of Sciences, grandpa, head of Goddard Institute for Space Studies, NASA

OMNI350 is an official member group of the Citizens Climate Lobby which meets the first Saturday of each month at 10:30 at the OMNI Center.

[The Climate Reality Project](#)

[350.org](#)

[OMNI Center](#)



WHY 350? Our Newsletter, 350PPM (parts per million concentration of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere) seeks to educate the public about the impending crisis of global warming and climate change. We must reduce greenhouse gas emissions and return the levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere to no more than 350 parts per million. It is only at these levels or below that the climate and environmental systems of the earth as we know them can be maintained. As a point of reference it was 1988 when the earth's atmosphere contained 350 PPM of CO₂.