

Last Word: The Kids Need Optimism, Not Doom and Degrowth

By Chelsea Follett



CHELSEA FOLLETT, ILLUSTRATION BY BARTOSZ KOSOWSKI

My kids love nature and we go camping as a family frequently, but as a parent, I'm concerned about some of the messaging they receive on conservation. My husband and I talk about environmental stewardship with our children by emphasizing the eco-modernist approach: Human beings have the unique ability to innovate their way out of problems, creating technological solutions that benefit both people and the planet. Unfortunately, children today are often bombarded with messages of an impending apocalypse that can only be ward off by lowering living standards and embracing "degrowth."

After a movie at her school about garbage in the oceans left her in tears as a teenager, Greta Thunberg came to believe that "technological solutions" and nondestructive economic growth are "fairytales." But in the years following that formative experience, scientists have invented cleanup ships that consume ocean plastic as fuel and developed a

type of plastic that harmlessly dissolves. Since the 1960s, global carbon dioxide emissions per dollar of gross domestic product have steadily declined, as technologies become greener and businesses cut energy costs. Yet Thunberg's mindset still mirrors the messages she received growing up.

In the United States, many public elementary schools now devote one day during Earth Week to "zero waste" through the reduction of consumption. But it's also possible to reduce waste through dematerialization: doing more with less via technology. Just think of all the devices a single smartphone replaces.

Even popular culture sometimes promotes this apocalyptic degrowth mindset to children. In a recent animated Disney movie called *Strange World*, the characters must give up electricity and drink cold coffee to protect a giant turtle-like creature and save their planet. In reality, protecting wildlife and rising living standards go

hand in hand: Beloved species such as the loggerhead turtle are rebounding in wealthy parts of the world, which have far more resources to devote to environmental protection than poor areas. Richer countries usually score higher on Yale's Environmental Performance Index.

Not only is the embrace of degrowth misguided, but research suggests that this doomsday mindset is causing widespread anxiety in young people. More than half of US youths aged 15–29 report experiencing “eco-anxiety,” a level of psychological distress that affects daily life, according to a 2024 poll. Another 2024 poll found that American middle and high school students’ most commonly reported emotional reactions to the thought of climate change were sadness, discouragement, helplessness, and uneasiness. A peer-reviewed paper explains how “climate anxiety can lead to symptoms such as panic attacks, loss of appetite, irritability, weakness and sleeplessness.” And that anxiety is international: A study from 2021, surveying 10,000 children and young people aged 16–25 in 10 countries, found that 59 percent of respondents were very or extremely worried about climate change, and more than 45 percent of respondents

said those feelings negatively affected daily life and basic functioning.

On Earth Day, my kindergartner came home from school having been told a familiar message: Riding a bike is better for the planet than driving a car. Her preschool had emphasized the same idea the year before. Many people love bicycles, but as the economist Tyler Cowen has pointed out, outside of poor countries, most people prefer cars to biking—and for good reason. For instance, without our minivan, it would be nearly impossible for my family to get around with three young kids, along with their snacks, spare clothes, and everything else.

Rather than romanticizing bicycling, what if we focused more on technological solutions that make driving cleaner or reduce commutes? That could mean greater freedom to innovate in fuel efficiency, easing regulations that limit electric cars’ potential to compete with traditional cars in the market, or removing outdated government barriers to remote work—such as telemedicine restrictions—to cut commutes. Zoning reform allowing more housing near workplaces could also reduce commutes and the associated pollution.

Instead of rushing to solutions that require lowering living standards via coercive government mandates or expensive taxpayer-funded subsidies, we should focus on the freedom to make technological advances that raise our standard of living while also mitigating environmental harm. An advantage of that approach is that it may also improve the mental health of young people—which would set this mom’s mind at ease. ♦

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