

carbonsense

Developing Carbon Literacy

a global challenge

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Carbon literacy

The most important task now facing human society is simple and clear – getting around a billion people ‘carbon literate’ within five years. We need to move on from talking about climate change - the story is told. If we carry on with ‘business as usual’ we will adversely change the planet we live on within the lives of generations now being born. Humanity is in for a rough ride unless we embed ‘carbon literacy’ in the DNA of the people and institutions on the planet who emit more greenhouse gases than nature can absorb.

What is carbon literacy?

Every entity (person, organisation, community or country) needs to know the basic carbon maths, how much they are individually responsible for, and what parts of their lives are the highest emitting. This has not been possible up to now for one very simple reason – the invisibility of the gas itself, and the invisibility of greenhouse gases in the landscape of our lives.

The majority of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions come from the activities and lifestyles of the highest earners – around a billion people worldwide. This is not about blame or making them feel bad – just a matter of education. In reality this can be relatively simple.

Why is carbon literacy essential?

There are several reasons – we don’t have much time, governments will need a mandate from society at large, and most importantly human creativity needs to be unleashed for this most massive challenge.

We don’t have much time

The emerging science is telling us we need to rapidly slow down the emission of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere – every day we release around 80 million tonnes of invisible carbon dioxide. We have a matter of a few years in which to hugely shift away from our dependence on fossil fuels.

Political mandate

Another reason for societal carbon literacy is the need for political mandate. Policy measures will have to be taken by governments around the world which may be unpopular unless people genuinely understand the rationale behind the changes. We have been living, for the last thirty years, in an era of very cheap energy. There has been no real incentive to save energy, or inhibit mass travel, as the fossil fuels have been abundant and inexpensive. That is now changing, not just because oil supplies may be peaking, thus doubling the oil price in the last year. Governments are recognising that carbon emissions themselves must be capped so carbon will in effect be priced – the market will start to incentivise a low-carbon future.

The need for creativity

The third and perhaps most important reason for carbon literacy is the need for creativity to crack the problem. Climate change is unique as a 'problem' in that we are all involved. Almost every person on the planet, to some degree, is contributing to the build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. We cannot just rely on governments and business to deliver solutions. Some of the solutions are high-tech, and the input of the average consumer will not be required. But many ways of minimising carbon emissions are low-tech, or may just require shifts in behaviour and thinking. House insulation is a good example of a low-tech solution which can save unnecessary carbon emissions – there are still a million homes in the UK which could have cavity walls insulated.

Once we get a carbon literate eye we see examples of unnecessary waste everywhere. Other solutions will require behavioural changes. Will it be a good idea to choose a job fifty miles from home in a low-carbon world? Could current journeys be shared with others? And once the imperative for a low-carbon future becomes apparent, unimaginable business opportunities will appear that help consumers and businesses with the shift.

How do we achieve carbon literacy?

The core of the problem is the invisibility of the greenhouse gases. We have cleaned up our act locally – we don't normally see black smoke coming from our chimneys and exhausts. But CO₂ is invisible, and the reality is that the 'cleanest' power stations, planes or cars still emit huge quantities. It may not be possible to make the actual gases 'visible' but we can make carbon visible in the transactions we undertake that have carbon emission consequences.

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