

# The Register-Guard

## Australia Could Be The Leader We Need

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By Bob Doppelt

Feb 27, 2020

Recently, I spoke with a psychologist from Australia who is assisting people impacted by the historic wildfires. She described how the destruction has created “deep sorrow, grief ... and anger.”

People feel confused, disoriented and hopeless. These reactions will become all too common locally and globally as the climate emergency accelerates. How the Aussies respond might offer important lessons about how we can rebuild meaning and hope.

Each of us holds deep-rooted beliefs about what is important, valuable and significant in life. These foundational concepts give our lives meaning, guide our thinking and determine the practices and policies we embrace. The Australian wildfires demonstrate that accelerating climate disasters and toxic stresses will shatter those beliefs. Many people intuitively sense this is coming, so they are clinging tightly to beliefs that give their lives meaning.

Many conservatives, for instance, feel that acknowledging the human role in creating the climate emergency, or supporting actions to minimize it, will undermine their belief in individualism, free markets and small government that gives their lives meaning. Denying empirical evidence and opposing cap and trade and other emission reduction policies are natural outcomes.

Many progressives also feel threatened by the looming threats to their perspectives. From compulsive use of high emission generating electronic gadgets, to support for endless consumption-driven economic growth, the beliefs that give many people concerned about the climate meaning in life make it difficult for them to embrace significant change. This is one reason climate policies often merely tweak business-as-usual.

The failure to alter our core beliefs is producing record disasters worldwide.

Experience shows that after a major disaster, people typically quickly try to reestablish meaning by affixing blame and demanding justice. My Australian colleague said this is now underway down under. Coal company executives, politicians and groups that denied the science or blocked solutions are being blamed for the devastation. They are consequently facing calls for criminal charges, reparations or revocation of their operating licenses.

Many Aussies also will strive to achieve a broader understanding of what happened and why, by framing the wildfires as moral and ethical failures. In different ways, people will proclaim that the unconstrained drive for profit, wealth and power produced the catastrophe. This will likely lead to new declarations about what it means to live a productive and honorable life.

How Australians approach renewal will also play an important role in how they restore meaning. Some will want to quickly reestablish to their previous sources of meaning by rebuilding their economy and communities much like they were before the wildfires. Others will strive to find meaning by declaring that previous thinking and approaches created the crisis and that Aussies should learn from the catastrophe and adopt safer, healthier and more ecologically sustainable ways to rebuild their economy and communities.

Societies that make difficult but needed changes in core beliefs and practices in response to major disasters and new conditions typically have much greater potential to regain control of their situation and thrive. Those that remain mired in old concepts and approaches tend to wither and die.

We here in Oregon will likely learn much about how to respond to the loss of meaning and hope generated by the climate emergency by watching how this plays out in Australia.

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