



**THE BLOG** 06/18/2012 03:26 pm ET | Updated Aug 18, 2012

# The End Is Nigh. Seriously.



By Marty Kaplan

In countless cartoons, there's a guy in a robe and long beard who's walking around carrying a sign saying The End Is Nigh. The joke is that he's ridiculous — some loony who takes the Book of Revelation literally. But what if the joke's on us?

The June 6 issue of the leading scientific journal *Nature* contains a paper co-authored by 22 researchers from all over the world. Their disciplines range from zoology, paleontology and geology to fields that are not your father's Oldsmobile, like ecoinformatics and computational ecology. Getting published in *Nature* means that independent peer reviewers have vouched for the quality of the authors' evidence and the rigor of their thinking. We're talking gold-standard science here.

What the paper says is that the earth is approaching a global tipping point, "a state shift in Earth's biosphere." It may happen in as few as 10 to 15 years; it may even have already happened. It will be irreversible, "a planetary-scale critical transition" whose consequences may include mass extinctions and "drastic changes in species distributions, abundances and diversity."

Its consequences could be as catastrophic as an asteroid hitting the Earth. But unlike asteroids, volcanoes, plate tectonics and other suspected culprits in the prior Great Extinctions, the cause of this tipping point is people.

There are 7 billion of us now; there will be over 9 billion when today's toddlers start having kids. To support that population, we've cleared more than 40 percent of the planet's surface for agriculture and urban development, and that will hit 50 percent by 2050. Add to that the fossil fuels we're burning, and the resulting carbon dioxide that we're pumping into the atmosphere is acidifying the oceans, melting the ice caps, messing with the climate and heading us toward "widespread social unrest, economic instability and the loss of human life."

So what do we do with news that bad?

The right's response has been denial - a war on truth. Rush Limbaugh calls science, academia, government and the media the "four pillars of deceit," a Red Queen maneuver that beheads anything incompatible with the Gospel of Rushbo. Sense is nonsense: if that's your epistemology, there's no arguing with it. Or, shifting from Lewis Carroll to the Doobie Brothers, "What a fool believes he sees, no wise man has the power to reason away."

But if you don't think that Nature is Pravda, if you can't wear a Science = Stalin button, if you don't believe that those 22 researchers have an ideological axe to grind, how do you process the news that the end may in fact be nigh?

There's another kind of denial, one that's different from Rush's de-definition of reason. Some facts are so disturbing that the only way we can handle them is magical thinking. If we don't dwell on them, they won't hurt us. If we ignore them, they'll go away. The proliferation of nuclear weapons is a familiar example. The obesity epidemic is another. We know how scary and intractable these problems are, but we quarantine those thoughts. Defense, Inc. and Food, Inc. spend whatever it takes to market images of security and pleasure to us, and we find them so appealing that we willingly inhabit a cloud cuckoo land that poses no threat to their profits.

But suppose we put away childish things. Suppose we faced the ecological bad news head on. What if the specter of a global tipping point, an irreversible environmental catastrophe, grabbed our attention as powerfully as the prospect of extinction grips the people of Earth in space invasion movies? We'd do everything we could to stop it, right?

In the U.S., the scale of action required to prevent such a state shift in our planet's biosphere can only be attempted by our political system.

Uh-oh.

Special interests own Congress. The Supreme Court's Citizens United decision holding corporations to be people, together with the demise of campaign finance laws, puts plutocrats first. Big media, while raking in billions from political ads, is holding audiences riveted to spectacles instead of holding candidates accountable for lying. If you think a re-elected Barack Obama could get a decent energy policy passed by the next Congress, you haven't been counting the Koch brothers' money or listening to Mitch McConnell.

The consequence of being a citizen who cares about issues like carbon footprints, peak oil and rising temperatures is a feeling of powerlessness. The oligarchs have us by the short hairs. If you aren't feeling impotent, you haven't been paying attention.

Powerlessness hurts — literally. It's a clinical diagnosis. The Occupy movement was, briefly, a kind of therapy for it. Tracking every online detail about the latest outrage is a recent form of self-medication for it. But as long as informed majorities are rendered helpless by a rigged system, the only thing more demoralizing than knowing how nigh the end may really be is being trapped, powerless, alongside that nutcase in the cartoon.