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With climate change, we need understanding and buy-in

Your Turn

Steve Goldman Guest columnist

Climate change is threatening our civilization, and it's much worse than most people think and, as a result, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (Editorial, Oct. 18) got it wrong.

Rising sea levels and temperatures are but a small part of what's changing. For example, wildfires long-predicted by scientists occurred with a vengeance in the western U.S. this fall causing 'hazardous' air quality in Eugene and other places for eight straight days in September. This problem is sure to be worse in the coming years.

If what is stated in the editorial is true ('It's unlikely that Americans will renounce growth.") and the idea is a "losing one" that we will give up beef, dairy, cars and drastically reduce our consumption, then we are destined to go the way of other failed civilizations that have vanished from the earth in the past.

Though the statement attributed to Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, that 'the world is going to end in 12 years if we don't address climate change,' sounds alarmist and may be hard to prove, it is important to understand just how precarious our current situation is, and what we can do to change this scary trajectory. The book 'Six Degrees,' by British journalist and author Mark Lynas, describes in detail what is likely to happen to the earth as it warms from 1 degree centigrade to 6. As the book explains, even a 2-degree rise will have devastating consequences to life as we know it. Climate scientist Michael Mann, a distinguished professor of meteorology at Penn State University, has calculated that the earth will warm past 2 degrees by 2036.

'The Uninhabitable Earth,' the 2019 book by David Wallace-Wells, provides an unvarnished description of how bad things really are at this moment. He writes, "Indeed, absent a significant adjustment to how billions of humans conduct their lives, parts of the Earth will likely become close to uninhabitable, and other parts horrifically inhospitable, as soon as the end of this century."

It's easy for us to blame 'the other guy," typically the fossil fuel industry and the corporations, for this sorry state of affairs, rather than take responsibility for our own behavior. But, the truth is, it's us. We are all responsible for what's happening to the Earth because of the way we live our lives, what we eat, how we get around, how many children we have, the way our homes are constructed, heated and cooled, and the way we consume resources.

While most climate activists focus on fossil fuels as the main villain in climate change, the reality is that the problem is more complex, and our food choices have a critical relationship to the health of our planet. According to the 2006 United Nations report Livestock's Long Shadow: 'The livestock sector emerges as one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global," including "problems of land degradation, climate change and air pollution, water shortage and water pollution, and loss of biodiversity..." and is responsible for 18% of greenhouse gases, more than the entire transportation sector (cars, trucks, airplanes, ships and trains). Most Americans eat meat — an average of 222 pounds per person per year. There are now about 80 billion livestock animals on the planet, and most are raised under conditions of unspeakable cruelty. An estimated 18 million acres of forest are lost each year, largely to make way for more animals. If we want to save our civilization, we need to change our eating habits. Each of us has 100% control over what we choose to put in our mouths. Making a choice to eat even one less meat meal per week could be an important first step toward avoiding climate catastrophe.

Steve Goldman is retired from a 33year career restoring disturbed lands. He now gives climate change talks in public schools and in the community.