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We don't need another billion people

By **Alan Weisman**, Special to CNN

October 15, 2013 -- Updated 1942 GMT (0342 HKT)

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Alan Weisman: In the next 12 years, world is expected to add another billion people

We have to cut greenhouse gases to stay on safe side of a 2-degree Celsius limit, he says

Weisman says the fastest and easiest way to limit carbon emissions is population control

Weisman: We need to educate women and give them access to contraception

Editor's note: Alan Weisman's new book is *"Countdown: Our Last, Best Hope for a Future on Earth?"* (Little, Brown and Co). He is also the author of *"The World Without Us,"* a 2007 New York Times and international best-seller translated into 34 languages.

(CNN) -- Charles Darwin once said that we can understand some parts of nature and the universe, but we can't comprehend them.

For instance, take the fact that in the next 12 years, we're projected to [add another billion people](#). Since a billion seconds equal 31.7 years, at the rate people are arriving, we can't even count them.

Or that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change now says that if we want to stay below a 2-degree Celsius (3.6-degree Fahrenheit) increase in average global temperature, we can't emit any more carbon dioxide than what's released by burning 1 trillion tons of carbon. But we've already used more than half our allotment.



Alan Weisman

There's a direct link between those two hard-to-grasp figures -- the more humans, the more carbon.

Every mile we drive, our cars emit about a pound of carbon dioxide. The [average U.S. driver clocks 12,000 miles per year](#), pushing six tons of carbon out of his auto's tailpipe. The quarter-billion cars in the United States expel 150 million tons a year. In the whole world, there are now well over 1 billion cars.

Those numbers are mind-boggling, even before we add the exhaust from our industries, power plants, and home heating and cooling. No, we can't easily comprehend the sheer scale of the problem, let alone imagine what we can do about it. But maybe this helps to frame it.

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Opinion on the news

Ted Cruz knows exactly what he's doing

October 18, 2013 -- Updated 1418 GMT (2218 HKT)



James Moore says the anarchy that runs through the politics of Cruz and the Tea Party and evident in the shutdown should frighten Americans, whose government can now be taken hostage if one man wants it

Should parents be criminally liable for kids' cyberbullying?

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Mark O'Mara says parents who don't monitor their kids' social media use should be held responsible for the consequences

Which politician do you hate?

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Frida Ghitis says angry Americans should focus on how to change the political system by supporting moderate voices, not by indulging in hatred for elected officials

Fit mom brings out the bullies

October 17, 2013 -- Updated 1622 GMT (0022 HKT)



Ruben Navarrette says the critics of a fit mother who sets a good example for her children are the ones guilty of bullying

Harry Reid: King of the Hill

October 17, 2013 -- Updated 1410 GMT (2210 HKT)



Paul Begala says the Senate Majority Leader, like the former boxer he is, extracted a total Republican surrender in the Great Shutdown Showdown of 2013

Jason Collins came out; NBA should let him play

October 17, 2013 -- Updated 1220 GMT (2020 HKT)



Jeff Pearlman says Jason Collins may not be a star player, but by not signing the first openly gay player in pro sports, the NBA is squandering its chance to lead



Climate change's impact on businesses

According to the World Resources Institute, to stay on the safe side of a 2-degree Celsius increase, we'd have to go back to the amount we were expelling in 1990 -- and then cut that in half.

How might we possibly do that? It will depend on how wisely we address the matter of those billion new humans.

Here are four ways to cut greenhouse gases, from the most unlikely to the most plausible:

The first is to trap them before they float skyward and start acting like glass in a greenhouse. This is possible -- theoretically. We know how to capture carbon dioxide from smokestacks (though not from all those cars). We'd then have to dig deep holes to pump it underground and somehow keep it there. One way is to inject the gas into underground saline aquifers, turning their contents into salty carbonic acid, which would then react with surrounding rocks until the carbon dioxide becomes entombed in solid carbonates.

That's very neat but very expensive. The only attempt in the United States, in West Virginia, was abandoned in 2011 by American Electric Power because it would have cost two-thirds of \$1 billion, even with the Department of Energy footing half the bill. Realistically, we'll never afford this -- and we're one of the rich countries. Imagine the rest of the world doing it.

The second possibility is finding new ways to produce clean energy. We must keep trying, but so far we can't concentrate enough diffuse sunlight or intermittent wind to run all our cities and factories (and it's hard to hang solar panels or wind turbines on cars).

Also, a [2012 paper in Environmental Research Letters](#) by former Microsoft chief technology officer Nathan Myhrvold and Carnegie Institution physicist Ken Caldeira showed that the carbon debt incurred by construction of renewable energy plants, including mining their materials, takes decades to amortize before their energy is truly emission-free. And exotic methods such as controlled nuclear fusion, which powers the sun's core, are enticing but perpetually decades away.

Third, we can use incentives such as carbon taxes and moral persuasion to bring down energy consumption. Again, these help, and must be encouraged. Although a number of countries and some U.S. states have passed carbon taxes, consumption is exceedingly hard to control in a world where, for example, even the world's poor masses, increasingly living in cities, manage to get cell phones. Whether the power is pirated or not, they plug in their chargers nightly. Despite all our best efforts to conserve and consume less, global carbon emissions reached a record high in 2012, and keep climbing.

Last, however, if we can't control consumption, we can control the number of consumers. This is technology we already have, and it's cheap. Every woman, everywhere, could have contraception.

Most of us would find coercive government limits on child bearing abhorrent. But giving women access to contraception and to education makes draconian edicts unnecessary. An educated woman has an interesting and useful contribution to make to her family and her society. Since she can't easily do that with seven children hanging on her skirts, most women who get through secondary school want two children or fewer. Providing access to contraception and educating women may be the fastest path to giving our planet a break.

In September, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change presented compelling evidence that seas are rising faster than ever in human history. The last time there was this much carbon in the

Republicans got what they wanted

October 18, 2013 -- Updated 1041 GMT (1841 HKT)



Julian Zelizer says the downside for Democrats is that GOP can use extreme tactics again in a few months to keep the focus on budget cutting

Five reasons America is still in trouble

October 17, 2013 -- Updated 1039 GMT (1839 HKT)



David Rothkopf says the takeaway from the shutdown crisis is: Washington is broken, and Americans have to force change at the ballot box

College application insanity gets worse

October 18, 2013 -- Updated 1156 GMT (1956 HKT)



David Marcus says the recent crash of a major college app site sent high school seniors and parents into a panic -- a perfect time to consider taking a "gap year" instead of college.

Why you should see '12 Years a Slave'

October 16, 2013 -- Updated 1417 GMT (2217 HKT)



Lewis Beale says the movie holds important lessons for Americans who would rather not confront a fundamental, shameful, part of the nation's heritage

We don't need another billion people

October 15, 2013 -- Updated 1942 GMT (0342 HKT)



Alan Weisman says the fastest and most affordable way to limit carbon emissions is population control.

Are Democrats more extreme than GOP?

October 15, 2013 -- Updated 1958 GMT (0358 HKT)



Alex Castellanos says the GOP has a group of relentlessly right wing members in the House, but as a whole Democrats have moved far to the left.

Republicans, stop living in fear

October 15, 2013 -- Updated 1321 GMT (2121 HKT)



Donna Brazile says the GOP's politics of brinkmanship and extortion created this shutdown.

In tech world, women ignored

October 15, 2013 -- Updated 1531 GMT (2331 HKT)



Soraya Chemaly says Twitter, with virtually no women in leadership, is one part of the tech industry's male dominated social structure, economy and culture--which relies on cradle-to-grave sexism to be profitable.

A tea party exit would be a blessing for GOP

October 14, 2013 -- Updated 2158 GMT (0558 HKT)



David Frum says the tea party has contaminated the GOP brand; if supporters bolt to a third party, good riddance.

atmosphere, at least 3 million years ago, oceans were 30 to 100 feet higher. Much of the world's most widely consumed foodstuff, rice, is grown near sea level, and the cost of protecting it with coastal dikes would be astronomical.

This month, a team of University of Hawaii climate modelers added in the journal *Nature* that in just seven years the tropics will be experiencing average temperatures unprecedented in recorded history -- and within a generation, so will the entire planet, unless we stabilize greenhouse gases in the next 20 years.

Population management can't do it all; we need a full-court press on all fronts. But if we want a secure future, we need to start with the fastest, most affordable way we know to limit carbon emissions: by bringing fewer emitters into the world.

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The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Alan Weisman.

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Why I'm saying goodbye to football

October 15, 2013 -- Updated 1152 GMT (1952 HKT)



Roxanne Jones says after a book's revelations that the NFL for years covered up the effects of brain trauma on players, she is turning away from her beloved sport.

Why healthcare.gov is a mess

October 15, 2013 -- Updated 1040 GMT (1840 HKT)



Steven Bellovin says large-scale software projects are hard; delays are the norm rather than the exception.

America's problem: We're too dumb

October 14, 2013 -- Updated 2002 GMT (0402 HKT)



It's no joke -- Americans score poorly on reading and math skills, and that bodes ill for democracy, writes LZ Granderson.

Stop fact-checking the movies

October 14, 2013 -- Updated 1214 GMT (2014 HKT)



Dean Obeidallah says it's a mistake to confuse entertainment films with documentaries that need to be true to the facts.

Men dither while women lead in the world

October 11, 2013 -- Updated 1735 GMT (0135 HKT)



Hanna Rosin says while men pose, swagger and act like children in the shutdown impasse, women--like Yellen and Merkel--are calmly, competently getting the job done

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