

Book Review

The Earth Transformed: An Untold Story (2023)

Author: Peter Frankopan

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The Earth Transformed is written by Peter Frankopan, a famous British historian and author of several books, the writer of *The Silk Roads*. This book, however, is entirely different from what he has written already. This is a mega narrative of environmental perspective of history. The presence of sapience on the Earth has always been viewed in linear fashion depicting progress starting from the earliest domestication of fire, plants and animals; inventions of writing, paper and gun fire; revolution in agricultural, science and industry and the consequent rapid race of accumulation of surplus or the maximization of capitalistic appropriation. This all resulted into making humans the most powerful specie on Earth which reduced the other living beings into insignificant. This is one side of the coin. Viewed from the environmental perspective, these developments are degradations in fact because the Earth has been reduced into a disordered house, filthy to the full and becoming increasingly uninhabitable for the all the living beings including humans.

The only life sustaining planet Earth is at the threshold of total collapse due to unprecedented extraction of resources and population growth greater than the carrying capacity of this small planet. Frankopan argues that “our planet, our enclosed garden (the literal meaning of the word ‘paradise’), has changed since the beginning of time, sometimes as a result of human endeavours, calculation and miscalculation, but also thanks to a host of other actors, factors, influences and impulses that have shaped the world we live in—often in ways we do not think about or understand”. The author is of the opinion that 1970s and 80s were dominated by the nightmarish scenario of impending nuclear war or accident

Moreover, he remembered being transfixed by the idea of acid rain and horrors of trees without leaves and by the thought that human activity was responsible for the degradation of nature.

The author notes that one film, *When the Wind Blows*, was released in 1980s and it painted a poignant and awful picture of what lay ahead: “sadness, suffering, hunger and death—all because of humanity’s ability to invent weapons of mass destruction that would not only kill millions through firestorms and explosions, but would change the earth’s climate so drastically that survival alone would be a miracle”. As a child the writer would prepare a bag and always liked to keep it with him, full of blue berries (considered to be resilient to the cold), a bar of chocolate, a Sweden Army penknife (to prepare bows and arrows), some swollen gloves, a deck of cards and three balls, two pens (in case one ran out of ink), and some paper to be used in case of apocalypse in hope of being one of the survivors.

However, the writer did not conceive that the end of the cold war would lead to age in which ecologies would be under immense pressure and greater stress and that “increased global economic co-operation would result in massive rises in levels of carbon emissions and warming world.” It was thought then that horrors are only associated with war and that peace and co-operation was bound to bring about prosperity and harmony. It meant that peace and harmony were the solutions to the problems related with war but the author was astonished to think that the same co-operation had geared up the massive exploitation and extraction from the nature which has started to disturb the fragile balance among the ecological mechanisms and systems. Now, world leaders ranging from UN to apex office holders in various strong countries have blown the trumpet for telling the truth that world is facing an unprecedented environmental crisis the kind of which Earth has not experienced before.

The author believes that if climate change is going to be the theme that will dominate 21st century, ‘sparking water shortages, famines large-scale migrations, military conflicts and mass extinction then understanding what the future holds should be

essential not just for politicians, scientists and activists, but for everyone.’ He believes that, being a historian, he knows that the best way to address complex problems is to look back in time, understand the context and perspective for solving current and future challenges. History can teach lessons to help formulate questions and sometimes propose answers to the problems. History carries evidence of natural phenomenon that can help us understand the phases in environmental changes taking place in many some millennia. For example, sea shells from the coast of Peru enable climate reconstructions through changes in the chemistry of shells that enable researchers to identify ocean temperatures. Likewise, records of cherry blossom festivals in Japan that started nearly fourteen centuries ago and it tells through flowering of cherry trees to establish when spring arrived each year over the course of many centuries. Thus, the author has explored various kinds of climate archives to study the past in environmental perspective.

Climate and temperature shape the biodiversity as well because the number of species decreases phenomenally from the equator to the poles, with some estimating that tropical forests contain more than half of the global the species. Nonetheless, it is now believed that tropical forests are astonishing in the range of animals and flora and fauna yet it is result of a gradual process of change spanning centuries and millenniums: actually new species come into existence faster in environments that are cold, dry, unstable and extreme. Thus one of the challenges posed by the climate science is that new evidence from some areas does not hold accuracy in other areas and vice versa.

It is established fact, however, now that the current and major changes to the climate are almost all because of human impact on the environment. Frankopan has argued that anthropogenic impacts began to have radical effect from the second half of the eighteenth century. It was due to the invention of steam engine and the energy and industrial revolution which transformed the process of production and the societies and started an oppositional relationship between man and the environment. The result is that according to UNICEF, one billion children,

nearly half of the total children of the world, are already at extreme risk of the impact of climate change. Hence, the fate of the climate is being seen to have been already sealed.

This book is of immense relevance and interest to the researchers, teachers, policy planners, and students of history, environmental and social sciences. It can be helpful for environment activists as well. It carries grand canvass and easy to read language.