

Descent Pathways

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Editorial introduction

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Purpose

The special issue has two main purposes. The first is to highlight the need for wider understanding of the 'civilisational challenge' facing humanity as it encounters and then exceeds significant limits to growth. The second is to present material that provides grounds for developing effective responses.

Design/Methodology/Approach

The issue draws on evidence from previous research, economic modeling and a range of other sources to investigate the hypothesis that humanity is heading toward an 'overshoot and collapse' future. It further suggests that a useful way of responding is to explore the possibility that the prospect of collapse can be moderated or avoided through a process of 'conscious descent.'

Findings

The main findings are that a very wide spectrum of policies, actions, strategies and options is available that can and should be employed to help us avoid the most disastrous manifestations of 'overshoot and collapse.' Yet there are also many barriers and impediments that continue to inhibit effective responses. This means that the process of coming to grips with the 'civilisational challenge' will take longer and become increasingly costly. Denialism and short term thinking remain embedded in dominant institutions and mainstream practice. Currently vastly more is miss-spent on various perverse incentives (e.g. advertising, the funding of denial, fossil fuel subsidies) than on securing the future of civilisation. This can be seen as a consequence of outdated values and inadequate worldviews.

Research limitations/implications

The contributions here represent a sample from within a rapidly expanding field of enquiry and action. They should therefore be seen as indicating the need for further high quality investigation, work and action. The main implication is that this process needs to be taken seriously, properly resourced and eventually transformed into a mainstream social project.

Originality/Value

The papers are contributions to depth understanding of a complex and evolving situation. Their value lies in the fact that greater understanding and a commitment to early action are among the most productive investments available to societies vulnerable to the systemic threats outlined here. As such the special issue evokes a fundamental tenet of foresight work in general. Or to put this in the words of Bertrand de Jouvenel 'the proof of improvidence lies in falling under the empire of necessity.'