
AM I THE ASSHOLE?
The world is ending and it's my fault
By Christian Kiefer
Illustrations by Stephen Haynes

Of course, it's also your fault and everyone else's too,

not to mention a long list of mega-polluting corporations, oil conglomerates and civic entities. The reality of our lifetime is that the balance of the planet's natural ecosystem has been shifted, perhaps irreparably, by human beings, and while it's easy to point the finger at the industrial producers of the world, as a climber I can't help but turn that same finger back toward myself. I began climbing because of a deep love of the natural world; should I not hold myself to a higher standard? Shouldn't we all?

I am a fully recreational climber and a mediocre one at that. I might have once had lofty goals, but at fifty-four years of age I've tempered those significantly. I know I'll never summit a 6000-meter peak, nor will I ever climb 5.13. I probably won't even climb 5.11, at least not as a trad leader, but that doesn't lessen my joy at being, well, anywhere.

Nonetheless, I still have a few dream climbs, one of which came to fruition last winter, when I had the good fortune of finding myself in the Charles Inglis Clark Memorial Hut at the base of Ben Nevis in Scotland. I am a nerd for climbing history, so much of my interest was to see, firsthand, what I had read about in historical accounts from the likes of Raeburn, Marshall, Smith and MacInnes. Neither the Ben nor, later, the Cairngorms disappointed. I was enthralled by the vicious weather, the unstable rime, the bleak, hard, beautiful climbing. Truly a dream come true.

Each evening on the Ben, I would retreat to the climber's hut and sit about with the various international climbers assembled there, telling stories, drying gear and planning the next day's adventures. Among my new friends were a trio of French climbers who had gone to great ends in minimizing the environmental impact of their travel to Scotland. One of them had come from the Congo, where his wife was doing humanitarian work. He was utterly gutted by the impact of his route, having flown to France before embarking, with his two friends, on a long train trip followed by walking, more trains, walking again, all of which was intended to reduce the overall carbon footprint of the journey. In contrast, I happily flew from Sacramento to Dallas to London to Glasgow and then took the train to Ft. William. I wish I could tell you that I agonized about the carbon footprint of all that travel, but alas, dear reader, I did not. I agonized only about the financial cost. The environmental costs were a fleeting thought, whipped away by the hot winds of my excitement.

But then again, I am American.

As I write this, California is aflame again. On the national news, palm trees throw horsetails of orange sparks into the black air. California always seems to be burning, but this time it is January, and one does not expect such occurrences in midwinter. Though in truth such expectations are changing with a rapidity that is staggering to the heart. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is following through on pledges to roll back environmental regulations, calling many of the methodologies put in place to slow and reverse global warming nothing more than a "Green New Scam" installed by political opponents.

This is the big picture, but much of my concern—at least in this essay—is not the ballot box but my own individual culpability as a climber. What justifies my own carbon footprint flying from California to Scotland? What justifies my petroleum-based technical clothing, undoubtedly shedding microplastics at an alarming rate? What justifies the forty-minute drive to my local crag for a couple of hours of "trying hard"? Is it worth the end of the world? Is it worth anything at all?

It is difficult for me to feel optimistic about our future as a species, our future as residents of the earth, but I am here to tell you that people with a better understanding of the science, at least those I have spoken with, tend to feel otherwise, among them climber and climate advocate Graham Zimmerman and environmental philosopher Alex Lee. Big outdoor gear companies like Black Diamond are looking hard at ways of reducing the impact of production. Even boutique outfits like Beartooth Alpine Equipment are deeply considering what they can do to limit their contribution to climate change. What I've learned in researching this piece is that we have the tools—we need only implement them. And yet does the world not feel as if it is tipping?

Americans, as a whole, seem less inclined to make decisions and base policies on the health and longevity of the natural world, at least not as individuals. Case in point, upon returning from Scotland (on a flight that produced a substantial amount of CO2 and associated greenhouse gases), I saw a friend's Instagram feed showing his trip from Wyoming to Alaska with a fleet of trucks, trailers and snowmobiles. Soon his crew was ripping turns on great, untrammeled faces. My immediate thought was not to criticize the environmental impact of such a trip but rather to wonder why I wasn't invited to join him.

In our modern lives, everything we do produces an environmental impact. Even as I write this at home, I am burning propane for heat and the lights are on, pulling power from an electrical grid mostly relying on natural gas. My lunch will be assembled from foodstuffs produced elsewhere and transported via airplane, boat or truck, in packaging manufactured in chemical plants spread across the globe. Later I will drive to the gym to get in a workout, my vehicle emitting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. When I climb, I'm dressed head to toe in petroleum products. I am a walking environmental disaster, but then again so are we all. Sure, the problem is that of economies, politics and policymakers. But are we as climbers not environmentalists at heart? Should we not care mightily about our own impact, however small it might be in the great sweep of global production, transportation and trade? What kinds of decisions could or should be made by us as individuals

with deep emotional ties to the outdoors? Or to put it another way: *How much guilt should I carry? How much responsibility?*

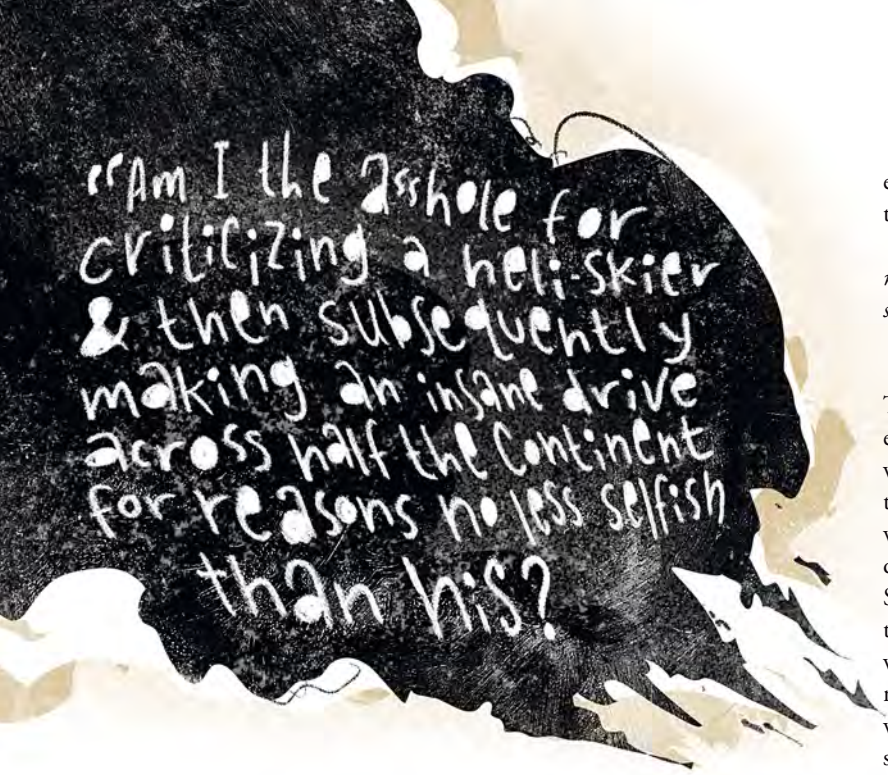
Despite how my rhetoric sounds, I'm not particularly interested in assigning blame. At best, this kind of thinking is akin to polishing the brass on the *Titanic*. At worst, it is a war criminal (me) denying his culpability on the argument that some other war criminal (you) is worse. Or this old gem: Developers want to build homes in the forest; environmentalists already own homes in the forest.

We are all to blame. So, what are we going to do about it? Perhaps more importantly, what are we willing to give up? Anything? Nothing?

Let's start with some big numbers. The Nature Conservancy suggests that "to have the best chance of avoiding a 2° rise in global temperatures, the average [individual] global carbon footprint per year needs to drop to under 2 tons by 2050." To put that number into perspective, according to Our World in Data, the average American produced 14.3 tons of CO_2 per year in 2023 (the most recent data available). The average Canadian, 14 tons. Lest we dismiss these numbers by assuming that high carbon dioxide emissions are simply the cost of living in the developed world, consider that the average member of the European Union (EU) produces 5.6 tons.

Suffice to say that as a general population, Americans tend to lack any real environmental commitment. Our consciousness holds to an image developed during the youngest years of our nationhood when we perceived the land as an endless and inexhaustible resource, virginal, untrammeled, ready for enterprising European immigrants to clear and plow. The metaphor of this continent as a "virgin land" led directly to the genocide of our Native peoples; to piles of dead buffalo left to rot in the sun; to the extinction of the passenger pigeon (which numbered between three and five billion before the arrival of Europeans, according to the Smithsonian Institution); and to the loss of as many as 650 other plants and animals native to the US, reports the Center for Biological Diversity. It has also led to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' unprecedented megafires, not only in the US but also in Russia, the Congo, Brazil and elsewhere. China—as a nation—has only recently taken the helm as the greatest greenhouse gas emitter, but America remains a close second according to MIT's *Technology Review* and the World Resources Institute.

This past winter, one of the students in my avalanche class was a snowboarder from the San Francisco Bay Area. He told me of a recent trip to Alaska for heli-skiing, after which I asked him if he'd do such a thing again. His response: "Absolutely." When I asked



him about the environmental impact of heli-skiing, he scoffed dismissively. "It's probably about the same as me driving up here from Marin," he said.

Let me be clear that I am not a climate scientist. I do hold a PhD, but alas, it is in English, so the reader must forgive me as I muddle through the various carbon calculators available online. Here's a possible analysis: According to Flights for Their Future, "a helicopter can emit 500kg [of CO2] in just a 1 hour flight." That's half a metric ton of CO2. In contrast, as I calculated on carbonfootprint.com, driving a plug-in hybrid from Marin County to Donner Summit might release as little as 0.03 metric tons of CO2. A gas-guzzler like the 2007 Chevy Tahoe I'm currently driving would release 0.13 metric tons on the same drive.

Soon after the AIARE class, I drove that Tahoe and my little travel trailer from Northern California to Cody, Wyoming, for the annual Wyoming Ice Festival. During that trip, I was responsible for releasing 0.71 metric tons of CO2 into the atmosphere. And of course that doesn't include the carbon costs of food or any of the physical materials of the journey. So what if I had flown? The numbers are not as easy to find as one might hope, with online CO2 emissions estimates ranging from 623 kilograms (icao.int) to 1.1 tons (CO2.myclimate.org) for my possible flight from Sacramento, through Denver, to Cody. How do I even begin parsing my carbon footprint when the numbers differ so widely? Still, I might have rented a more fuel-efficient vehicle at the airport and stayed in a modern hotel room with better energy efficiency than my poorly insulated travel trailer, which requires an almost endless supply of propane to heat. Propane is considered a relatively clean fuel, but still. As they say, *When you make a deal with the Devil, it can be hell.*

The possible conveyances above might have resulted in more expense but potentially less carbon impact, which brings us to the inequity of the problem: it's difficult to reduce one's environmental impact on a budget. Rich people drive Teslas and the like. The rest of us drive whatever we can afford.

Am I the asshole for criticizing a heli-skier and then subsequently making an insane drive across half the continent for reasons no less selfish than his?

Yes, dear reader, yes I am.

The idea of individual responsibility for carbon emissions entered the wider public consciousness in approximately 2006 when multi-billion-dollar oil company British Petroleum pushed the impetus for reducing greenhouse gases onto the consumer via its "It's time to go on a low-carbon diet" ad campaign. This despite the fact that BP, alongside Chevron, ExxonMobil and Shell, not only spends vastly more on oil and gas production than it does on reducing emissions, but also actively lobbies to weaken emissions policies, according to a 2022 peer-reviewed report published at *PLOS One.* Fundamentally, the idea of individual responsibility was manufactured by Big Oil to turn the spotlight away from industrial pollutants and focus it squarely on you and me. Should we try to reduce our individual greenhouse gas impact? Absolutely. Is a major oil company the best entity to take environmental advice from? I doubt it.

One of the corporate solutions to increasing pressure from environmental groups was the creation of "carbon offsets." The idea is that companies (and individuals) producing greenhouse gases can put money into projects that work either to actively lower overall CO2 emissions or to sequester CO2, storing it via geologic or biological means. To simplify things: planting trees is sequestering CO2; putting money into a wind farm is paying for an offset.

Like the term *carbon footprint*, the idea of carbon offsetting has a somewhat controversial history. The practice was initially developed as part of the 1977 amendments to the Clean Air Act, not as a way for individuals to lower their actual environmental impact but as a way for companies to do … well, whatever they wanted. The mechanism allows for corporate entities to produce an excess of greenhouse gases by paying other companies to produce fewer, an economics that may make sense in terms of shareholder expectations but makes little sense when considering the actual environment.

Nonetheless, the cultural idea of carbon offsets may have some greater effect on how we view our role in the natural world, in that it offers a method by which an individual can scrutinize their own carbon impact. Knowing what kind of emissions you are producing in your day-to-day life is the first step in understanding how you might reduce them. The trouble here, though, is twofold: First, there's no one entity overseeing carbon offsets, so it's hard to know that the money you're spending is actually doing anything at all. The other problem is that, even if you're able to find a legitimate carbon offset, there's really no way to offset one's actual carbon use as a one-to-one ratio; in other words, I can't pay off my own environmental guilt regardless of how much I pay into the offset market. I'm still producing CO2, and that's still wrecking the winter climbing I so love.

"Nepal is a consequence nation of the first order," Conrad Anker tells me at his home in Bozeman. "Places like the Maldives and Bangladesh, they're going to suffer the effects of climate change even though their population, per capita, is a minimal amount of contribution." There are few climbers as recognizable as Anker, and sitting across from him in his living room is to recall all I've read about him, and of course the films and photographs, not the least of which is *Meru*, my all-time favorite climbing film. The house is quiet, empty but for the two of us. On the wall hangs an enormous Jimmy Chin photograph of Everest, an image staggering in its clarity and emotion.

Anker is prepping for a trip to Nepal where he will visit the Khumbu Climbing Center, a school he developed in 2003 with his then-wife Jennifer Lowe via the Alex Lowe Charitable Foundation. Since then, the center has trained more than a thousand Indigenous men and women in the art and science of high-altitude climbing. This is a tangible way in which to give back to a land Anker has loved since his first trip there in 1988. "I'm aware of the carbon footprint," he tells me. "I look at going to Nepal as my work because I'm working on a carrying capacity study looking at Everest and tourism and also their education system there. I'm connected. I've been going there since '88 and I've got all these connections that I can't just let go."

Anker hopes his work will buoy Nepal's overall economic infrastructure so that individual Nepali citizens have a greater quality of life, including education and health care. As a professional climber, Anker has had (perhaps) a greater carbon footprint than the average weekend warrior, at least in terms of climbing. Having said that, Anker's local climbing area—Hyalite Canyon—is less than ten miles from his home. He doesn't commute to work on a daily basis, although he does fly to Denver to meet with the North Face, with which he has worked in various capacities since 1983. Contrast this to, say, your average American worker. Kelley Blue Book lists the most popular cars in the US as Ford F-Series trucks. As of 2022, the most recent data we have from the US Department of Transportation, the average American drives approximately twenty-nine miles per day, or 10,585 miles per year. At twenty-three miles per gallon, the 2025 F-150 will burn 460 gallons of gasoline, which will, according to the Environmental Protection Agency's calculations, produce four metric tons of CO_2 emissions in one year.

But does a trip to Nepal negate this metric? It's easy to look at Anker's travel as purpose-driven; he is traveling to Nepal to work on specific projects that will, he hopes, improve the overall quality of life of the region and country. But isn't the commuter effectively doing the same thing in driving to their place of work? They are trying to give themselves and their family the best possible life. So where does this leave us?

Even now, as I sit at my desk, my backgrounded browser hovers on flights to Bozeman and Canmore, both places I'd like to climb at this season before the ice melts off. So here I am being the asshole again. I feel like a baby saying this, but I just want to climb. Why is this so difficult?

Part of my personal conundrum can be framed by what philosophers call the "prisoner's dilemma," a thought experiment that runs like this: A group of captured bank robbers are interrogated individually. If they all stick to their story and provide alibis, all of them get off; but if only one flips, they all go to jail (except the one who flipped). In other words, individual action, even when rational, can—and often does—make it worse for the collective. In terms of the current discussion, this handily explains why every morning 91 percent of us commute to work in our personal vehicles rather than taking public transportation or even carpooling, according to the US Bureau of Transportation Statistics. We'd rather fight traffic than leave a little earlier to catch the light rail. Of course this assumes that we actually have access to reliable public transportation, which in many cases we don't because of the huge up-front investment that is most often required. Fundamentally, we could all join together for the good of the earth but, you know, we just don't wanna.

In terms of environmental philosophy, the prisoner's dilemma offers a way to look at the overarching lack of effort most Americans place on their own carbon footprint. As individuals, very few of us consider the implications of, for example, a single-serving plastic container purchased at a gas station. We do not see any moral responsibility there, and yet that plastic container will likely end up in a landfill (or the ocean), where it will take 450 years to disappear. Even then it will never truly be gone, instead breaking down into microplastics (the same kind your fancy climbing clothes are probably shedding even as you read this article). Your climbing harness is likely made of some or all of the following: foam, nylon, polyester, ultra-high-molecular-weight polyethylene (e.g., Dyneema) and/or elastic. All of these materials are made primarily of petroleum, so before you assuage your guilt by opting out of buying that plastic water bottle, understand that the polymers that make up your harness will also last more than 450 years.

So what do we do?

The problem, of course, is that climate change is so big that it feels as if an individual's actions have no bearing on its outcome whatsoever. So we enjoy the current pollutant-heavy iterations of snowmobiles while simultaneously lobbying to have them eliminated. "It seems as though people need to be *offended* by a particular action in order to consider it out of bounds morally," Byron Williston writes in *The Ethics of Climate Change*, "but an action being perceived as harm-causing does not entail that it will also be seen as offensive." Part of this is what philosophers call the "negligibility thesis," the idea that one's individual actions have a negligible effect on the overall product or system. The drive from Brooklyn to the Shawangunks is 190 miles round-trip. You won't see any tangible environmental effect from that journey. Even if twenty individual vehicles made the trip that day, the overall effect would be negligible given the vast number of cars on the road nation- and worldwide. Your effort is but a tiny drip in the ocean.

These are average Americans. As climbers, are we any more or less average? Do we commute more miles or fewer? Do we use public transportation more or less? As far as I'm aware, there are no studies that chart any of this, nor do I really think such a study would be particularly useful. What I believe is that environmentalists—and we are, I hope, all environmentalists—should be held to a higher standard, not by the community but by ourselves as individuals. And yet I still don't know how I, as a climber, can make any determination as to what is permissible in our pursuit of the sport. When can I travel without thinking of the environmental impact? When is it worth it? When does the benefit to me outweigh the costs to the earth? I understand that to many of you this will sound utterly absurd. In the United States alone, according to the Political Economy Research Institute's "Greenhouse 100 Polluters Index," the three companies atop that list—Vistra Energy, Southern Company and Duke Energy—were responsible for 4.1 percent of all US greenhouse gas emissions in 2022. The top 100 produced nearly 30 percent, or about 1.8 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalents. These are huge entities crossing borders and ecosystems. Even if we point the finger of blame in their various directions, how can the takeaway be something other than total despair?

Still, I cannot help but feel that we climbers have a particularly deep responsibility to the natural world. On their website, under the heading "Live an Examined Life," Protect Our Winters acknowledges the importance of individual change: "While we are committed to advocating for systemic solutions, we also recognize that when individuals collectively choose to live sustainably, those individual choices can lead to a massively important ripple effect that can inspire policy changes at broad levels."

The human heart—mine anyway—struggles to stay buoyant in the face of these realities, but one way to heal, and to move toward action and forgiveness, is to consider how our relationship to the natural world can be expressed as concrete virtues. Williston has worked on this idea, splitting climate crisis virtues into two broad categories: those of human–human relations and those of human–nature relations. Under the first category, Williston places *courage*, *benevolence* and *hope*. Under the second: *frugality*, *humility* and *respect*. If these are terms that speak to you as a human being and as a climber, perhaps they may serve to guide you in developing your own metric. Does booking a heli-skiing trip into the Alaskan backcountry fit this metric *for you*? If it does, then go for it. Does the benefit to you, to the community you serve and/or to the mountains outweigh the expense to those same facets? Is this a trip you've dreamed of all your life?

How about, for example, that dream trip to the Greater Ranges. Through the guide service he founded in 2004, Alpenglow Expeditions, Adrian Ballinger has made a career of helping people achieve their dream climbs around the world, an activity that, of course, requires a lot of travel. "Many of us have spent years heli-skiing in Alaska," Ballinger tells me over coffee in Tahoe City, "even if you don't do as much of that anymore. I do think it's important we own those things. Is it hypocritical? I don't think so."

Hypocrite is a term that Ballinger brings up a few times in our conversation, at first referencing *The Hypocrite*, a film that seeks to address the various ways in which snow sports advocates are

imperfect climate advocates. The film left me very unsettled, particularly as I watched scenes of snowmobilers blasting through powder and heard a narrator's voice imploring us not to be divided in addressing climate change, the big polluters being the real issue, not us individual outdoorspeople. It was, for me, an uncomfortable point to land on, though generally speaking it's not wrong. Again, I wish we, as a community, held ourselves to a higher standard and did not so readily discount our own egregious behavior, myself included.

And yet we want—perhaps even need—to access wild places. Ballinger's view is to conserve in a realistic manner. "I'm not out there preaching that everyone needs to stop using every drop of oil today," he tells me. "I do not believe that's a realistic path of growing a coalition to making the systemic change we need to make."

Ballinger points out that professional athletes live with a set of significantly different expectations than recreational climbers in terms of the traveling they do for work. "Vans are a good example," he says. "I and many of our friends drive vans that guzzle oil and get terrible gas mileage, but a van can be a really valuable tool. I don't think we should hide that we own those or use those. I think we should explain why we do that and continue pushing the industry to get to the point where the infrastructure is in place where an electric van is actually realistic. Is it today? I honestly think it isn't. In five years? I honestly think it will be. And it's because of our groups and voting and pushing the industry to where you'd think: Why would you buy a gas van when an electric van is better?"

Ballinger is equally forthcoming about his piloting a private plane, a choice that might put him squarely in the crosshairs of climate activists, and yet his very forthcomingness speaks to a sense of his own considered life. "I'm one of the only pilots around here that publicly puts on my social media that I'm flying and things like that, because I don't think hiding is the way. We own those things and I don't think we should be scared to own those things. I think it's much worse to hide those things."

What this means, in terms of an examined life, is making decisions that trade one possibly larger environmental impact for choices lessening other possible impacts. "I've figured out how to acclimatize and be able to fly to South America and climb 20,000-foot peaks in a long weekend," Ballinger tells me. "Would I sometimes like to do that a little more, see a great weather window and fly to Peru and climb a big peak and be right back to my son? Yeah. But those are the things I don't do anymore.

"I offset all of my personal travel, and we brought that into Alpenglow Expeditions. We offset all our guides' impacts and infrastructure impact, and then we encourage our clients to do the same. Is it a solution? No. But is it a statement? Yes. And I think that's where I and Alpenglow and a lot of us can have some impact."

This sentiment is echoed by Graham Zimmerman. Like Ballinger, Zimmerman has made a name for himself climbing in the Greater Ranges, and he is the former president of the American Alpine Club. Lately, though, he's more in the public eye as a climate advocate. Still, there is controversy there, controversy Zimmerman himself highlighted in his 2020 film *An Imperfect Advocate*. At one point during the film, a high school student asks him if he's

"We have all the solutions we need. We can solve the problem...
And so that makes me Incredibly, Incredibly hopeful."

stopped driving and flying in order to limit his carbon footprint. Another says, "If we're not the ones who are going to stop driving, then who is?" Similar questions have been asked of him many times since, including during a talk he gave at the Bozeman Ice Festival this past December. Can we be climate advocates without making real changes to what we do and how we do it? At this point in his career, Zimmerman is largely traveling as part of his climate advocacy work, but what about us weekend warriors who are just trying to get outside and have fun?

Zimmerman has thought hard about these issues. "The thing that I recommend that people think about as climbers—as gritty folks who like doing hard things and have these amazing stories," he tells me, "is … look at your life and the ways that you can drive change in the world around you, and how can you leverage those tools and those basic skill sets in order to drive that change." The idea here is that, yes, we live examined lives but also do our best to advocate big, systemic changes. "The solution is that we invest in systemic decarbonization—building EV infrastructure," Zimmerman says, "that we invest in decarbonized air travel, that we invest in decarbonizing the way that we produce the goods that we need in order to go do this stuff. Invest in a system that allows you to go to Montana and climb in a way that is either carbon neutral or just way more carbon efficient. That's the world we want to live in. Does that mean we can just say, 'Fuck it, I'm just gonna rage hard on my snowmobile and just start burning gasoline in cans in my backyard because it doesn't matter'? Absolutely not. We have to live examined lives. And a journey that I have been on, and have found a lot of purpose in, is looking for ways to make sure the climbing that I am doing is not only having an impact on the world around me through those stories, through the opportunities it provides in terms of platform, but also making sure that if I'm gonna go on a trip, that it is something that I'm really fired up about."

So, what does this all amount to for us as individuals, as climbers, as people with deep ties to the natural world? Perhaps it means that we climb with greater intent and make some decisions to help reduce the environmental impact that our travel, consumption, food choices and lives bring to the world. I'm not here to give advice, for there are no easy solutions, nor are there blanket solutions for everyone. Suffice to say, though, bringing four people to the crag in a single car at the very least divides your individual impact by four, and considering other ways to limit our carbon footprint in our daily lives might well go a long way. But even more important—and this came up again and again during my research and discussions for this article—is the advocacy and policy work of the larger groups like Access Fund, the American Alpine Club, Protect Our Winters and many others, including grassroots and community-based organizations and projects.

"Often the path to addressing the personal problem and the path to addressing the collective problem ends up being the same," environmental philosopher Alex Lee points out during a Zoom interview. For me, this does not mean that I can write a check and thoughtlessly do whatever I want, wherever I want, but rather it acknowledges that my own individual guilt is minor compared to the larger sweep of climate policy. The Trump administration has repealed the Clean Water Rule, gutted the EPA, removed the US from the Paris Agreement on climate change, has mostly dismantled the Clean Power Plan and has laid off hundreds of climate workers at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. And here I am marinating in guilt about single-use plastic bottles. Does my decision to try not to buy plastic make any difference as the world literally and figuratively burns? Maybe not, although at least I'll have avoided personally contributing that load of microplastics into our oceans. Someone else will buy that bottle, sure, but it won't be me.

When I ask Lee if he has any hope at all for our future, he says yes without hesitation. We've just spent an hour talking about melting glaciers and the record-low snowfall at his home in Anchorage, and yet Lee is unwavering in his belief that we will see a reversal.

"I'm incredibly hopeful," he tells me. "We have all the solutions we need. We can solve the problem. Solar energy is 80 percent cheaper than it was fifteen years ago. The economics of oil and gas development are pushing more and more renewable projects online. The world as a whole is decarbonizing. We're getting more for every unit of carbon we spend. We're probably at about peak emissions. And we're going to see increasingly rapid decarbonization regardless of politics at this point because of, simply, technology. And so that makes me incredibly, incredibly hopeful. You know, the world is more resilient than we give it credit for."

I am still deeply worried about my own lack of hope in relation to a planet that often feels at the precipice of total ruin. I understand that my guilt does not readily solve any problems, not for me and certainly not for the earth. Yet my desiccated black heart is at least somewhat heartened by the positions of the folks I've spoken to, not only those quoted here but other, more casual conversations with climbers and guides and friends who, like me, like all of us, love the natural world. Though it's not enough to save any of us from the consequences of the Anthropocene, considering what impact you have and what decisions you are willing—or not willing—to make is a start. It is part of living that examined life.

Look around the space you now occupy. Look at the physical materials around you. Think of where and how these items were produced, how they were transported from that location to where you are now. Then consider the materials themselves. Everything plastic within your sight will be around for half a millennium before it finally degenerates into microplastics. What's in your refrigerator? Beef, cheese, chocolate and coffee are foodstuffs with some of the largest carbon footprints, mostly because of the processing and transportation costs. You can make choices to shop locally, but only if there is something local to buy and if you have the financial wherewithal to do so. Or you can eat less of the stuff that has the highest environmental costs.

We think of our relationship to climbing as being in the mountains or at the crag, but our relationship begins with the decisions we make at home. How can you love your local crag without taking into account the contents of your own refrigerator?

Could we live better lives *now*? I think we can.

And yet I just opened my refrigerator. Am I the asshole? Yes, dear reader, yes I am. But so are we all. ▮