

Make extreme wealth extinct: it's the only way to avoid climate breakdown

By George Monbiot, *The Guardian*,
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Pandering to the rich has got us into this mess. The correlation between wealth and polluting behaviour could not be clearer.



'A superyacht, kept on permanent standby, as some billionaires' boats are, generates around 7,000 tonnes of CO2 a year.'
Photograph: Valéry Hache/AFP/Getty Images

Most of our dysfunctions are caused by pandering to the rich. The way governments have allowed democracy to be eroded by lobbyists (including politicians with lucrative private interests); the deregulation that lets corporations, oligarchs and landlords squeeze their workers and tenants, then dump their costs on
5 society; the permissive environment for profiteering during the pandemic; the degradation of health, education and other public services by the constant drive towards privatisation: all these are symptoms of the same condition.

The same applies to the worst of our predicaments: the destruction of our life-support systems. The very rich arrogate to themselves the lion's share of the planetary space on
10 which we all depend. It is hard to understand why we tolerate this attack on our common interests.

The richest 1% of the world's people (those earning more than \$172,000 a year) produce 15% of the world's carbon emissions: twice the combined impact of the poorest 50%. On average, they emit over 70 tonnes of carbon dioxide per person every year, 30 times
15 more than we can each afford to release if we're not to exceed 1.5C of global heating. While the emissions of the world's middle classes are expected to fall sharply over the next decade, thanks to the general decarbonisation of our economies, the amount produced by the richest will scarcely decline at all: in other words, they'll be responsible for an even greater share of total CO2. Becoming good global citizens would mean cutting
20 their carbon consumption by an average of 97%.

Even if 90% of the population produced no carbon at all, the anticipated emissions of the richest 10% (those earning over \$55,000) across the next nine years would use almost the entire global budget. The disparity in environmental impact mirrors a nation's inequality. No wonder the prosperous people of the wealthy nations are so keen to seek to shift
25 the blame to China, or on to other people's birthrates: sometimes it seems they will try anything before attending to their own impacts.

A recent analysis of the lifestyles of 20 billionaires found that each produced an average of over 8,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide: 3,500 times their fair share in a world committed to no more than 1.5C of heating. The major causes are their jets and yachts. A super-
30 yacht alone, kept on permanent standby, as some billionaires' boats are, generates around 7,000 tonnes of CO2 a year.

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Big money now buys everything: even access to the meetings that should address these dysfunctions. On some accounts, Cop26 is the most exclusive of all climate summits.
35 Delegates from poor nations have been thwarted by a cruel combination of byzantine visa requirements, broken promises to make Covid vaccines available, and the mad costs of accommodation, thanks to government failures to cap local prices, or make rooms available. Even when delegates from poorer nations can scale these walls, they often find themselves excluded from the negotiating areas, and therefore unable to influ-
40 ence the talks.

By contrast, more than 500 fossil fuel lobbyists have been granted access, more than the combined delegations of eight nations that have already been ravaged by climate breakdown: Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Mozambique, Myanmar, Haiti, Puerto Rico and the Bahamas. The perpetrators are heard, the victims excluded.

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