



PLANETARY HEALTH WEEKLY

BRINGING YOU CURRENT NEWS ON GLOBAL HEALTH & ECOLOGICAL WELLNESS

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LOSS OF FERTILE LAND FUELS LOOMING CRISIS ACROSS AFRICA

Climate change, soil degradation and rising wealth are shrinking the amount of usable land in Africa. But the number of people who need it is rising fast. Africa itself has a land problem. The continent seems so vast and the land so open. The awesome sense of space is an inextricable part of the beauty here, the unadulterated vistas, the endless land. But in a way, that is an illusion. Population swells, climate change, soil degradation, erosion, poaching, global food prices and even the benefits of affluence are exerting incredible pressure on African land. Large groups of people are on the move, desperate for usable land. It is a two-headed problem, scientists and activists say, and it could be one of the gravest challenges Africa faces. The quality of farmland in many areas is getting worse, and the number of people squeezed onto that land is rising fast.

[Read More on The New York Times](#)



WHY ARE WE IGNORING THE CLIMATE RISK ALARM BELLS

Imagine what would happen if one of the world's most influential investment firms issued a stark warning that climate change was accelerating the global economy towards a 'cliff edge' that few industries were prepared for and which would result in a long term global GDP losses of up to 50 per cent. Schroders Andrew Howard, with \$520 billion of assets under management, just published a briefing paper and launched a new Climate Progress Dashboard, which should have led bulletins around the world. It explained how "climate change is not a future possibility, it is well underway" and detailed how based on current trends within three decades a trajectory for more than 2 degrees of warming this century will likely be locked in. "The challenge is becoming more acute every year," it warned. One of the world's top asset managers, a company with no environmental axe to grind and a vested interest in stability and long term returns, is projecting plausible worst case scenarios that effectively amount to the collapse of the global economy within our lifetimes. Its best case scenarios are far more attractive, but require a fundamental reshaping of the global economy which will also present immense risks and opportunities for investors and businesses.

[Read More on Business Green](#)



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Girls in Honduras Advocated to End Child Marriage and Won

Earlier this month, lawmakers in Honduras's National Congress voted unanimously to raise the minimum age for marriage from 16 to 18. They removed a loophole in the law which had meant that children under 18 could get married with the permission of their parents. Honduran girls supported by Plan International have been campaigning for this loophole to be closed for the past two years! Honduras's decision to fully ban child marriage for all young people under the age of 18 is a historic achievement for girls' rights. "This is a historic change which has the potential to benefit the lives of millions of girls, and we couldn't have done it without the hard work and passion of young people," said Belinda Portillo, Country Director of Plan International Honduras. "For the lawmakers to hear from girls with personal experience of child marriage was a vital part of the process. By participating in this campaign, these young people have helped to put an end to a practice which is a violation of girls' human rights and robs girls of their childhood."

[Read More on Plan Canada](#)

Why This Adorable Mouse is to Blame for the Spread of Lyme Disease

White-footed mice, known for their wide eyes and ears, long tails and snow-white bellies and the feet from which they get their name, are often overlooked by humans, hiding out by the billions in forests, shrubby thickets and even wooded wetlands. But there's one creature that knows them well: the tick. Scientists say white-footed mice, which are primary carriers of the Lyme bacterium *Borrelia burgdorferi*, are a highly popular host of black-legged ticks, which consequently makes them a key culprit in the spread of Lyme disease. Scientists say that white-footed mice are posing a particularly high risk to humans this year. A bountiful acorn harvest a couple of years ago gave them the sustenance needed to reproduce in greater numbers and climate change may be pushing them to expand their range toward the north. There are areas in the United States where Lyme disease is rare and, in those places, few or none of the white-footed mice are infected. But in an endemic area such as one that extends from Virginia to Maine, at least half and sometimes up to 90 percent of the mice are infected with Lyme bacteria.

[Read More on The Washington Post](#)



IBM'S Watson is Bringing Cutting-Edge Cancer Treatment to Every Corner of the Earth

The company, which has seen its revenue decline for 20 straight quarters, is in the midst of a massive readjustment of its core business, shifting away from mainframes to cloud services. Ginni Rometty, who has been attempting to orchestrate a turnaround at IBM since she became CEO in 2011, saw the potential in Watson. IBM began to advance Watson's ability to find patterns, signals in the noise, and to understand what people are saying when they write or speak. Soon after winning Jeopardy, IBM announced it would start developing commercial products out of Watson, and hoped to have something within two years. In 2012, IBM partnered with Sloan Kettering, a cancer-treatment and research center based in Manhattan, to create a "decision-support tool" to aid doctors in making real-time treatment decisions based on the most up-to-date cancer research. In Omaha, researchers have been putting Watson to the test. A team led by Babu Guda, a professor at the University of Nebraska Medical Center and the director of bioinformatics at Cowan's cancer center, has sequenced tumor samples from 650 patients.

[Read More on Quartz](#)



Climate Scientist Blows the Whistle After Trump Administration Tries to Silence Him

Joel Clement used to be the director of the Office of Policy Analysis at the U.S. Interior Department. But, Mr. Clement lost his job and became a whistleblower on the Trump administration and their practice of trying to silence facts and reality. "I am a scientist, a policy expert, a civil servant and a worried citizen. Reluctantly, as of today, I am also a whistleblower on an administration that chooses silence over science. Nearly seven years ago, I came to work for the Interior Department, where, among other things, I've helped endangered communities in Alaska prepare for and adapt to a changing climate. But on June 15, I was one of about 50 senior department employees who received letters informing us of involuntary reassignments. Citing a need to "improve talent development, mission delivery and collaboration," the letter informed me that I was reassigned to an unrelated job in the accounting office that collects royalty checks from fossil fuel companies." Clement goes on to explain that he believes he was demoted because he spoke out publicly about climate change and more specifically he voiced concerns about its affects on Native American communities in Alaska.

[Read More on Daily Kos](#)

[See Also on The Hill \(Top EPA Official Resigns Over Direction of Agency Under Trump\)](#)

Propaganda Video Claiming Dirty Electric Cars Debunked

For years, electric-car skeptics raised concerns about what was cleverly dubbed "The Coal Tailpipe": the idea that plug-in vehicles produced just as many harmful emissions as gasoline cars, but in a different place. That's not remotely true for carbon dioxide, as multiple studies over the years have shown, though it is in limited cases for a small number of individual pollutants emitted by certain types of powerplants. Now, a new theme for anti-electric-car propaganda has begun to make the rounds. The website HybridCars.com recently published a lengthy and detailed rebuttal to a new video circulating on social media. The piece is titled, "Oil Lobbyists' Video Takes Cheap Shots At Electric Cars." It doesn't mince words, either, calling the video "disinformation and error-filled," and noting that it's being carefully targeted to specific sets of users. The 90-second video is put out by a lobbying group, Fueling U.S. Forward, that calls itself "a non-profit organization dedicated to educating the public about the value and potential of American energy, the vast majority of which comes from fossil fuels." The video, "Dirty Secrets of Electric Cars," suggests that we "need to start having a more honest conversation" about the impacts of electric-car manufacturing. It claims that they contain numerous toxic materials that are not found in conventional vehicles powered by fossil fuels, and attempts to tie those materials to child labor in mines.

[Read More on Green Car Reports](#)



Climate Change to Cause Humid Heatwaves that Will Kill Even Healthy People

Extreme heatwaves that kill even healthy people within hours will strike parts of the Indian subcontinent unless global carbon emissions are cut sharply and soon. Even outside of these hotspots, three-quarters of the 1.7bn population, particularly those farming in the Ganges and Indus valleys, will be exposed to a level of humid heat classed as posing "extreme danger" towards the end of the century. The new analysis assesses the impact of climate change on the deadly combination of heat and humidity, measured as the "wet bulb" temperature (WBT). Once this reaches 35C, the human body cannot cool itself by sweating and even fit people sitting in the shade will die within six hours. Heatwaves are already a major risk in South Asia, with a severe episode in 2015 leading to 3,500 deaths, and India recorded its hottest ever day in 2016 when the temperature in the city of Phalodi, Rajasthan, hit 51C. Another new study linked the impact of climate change to the suicides of nearly 60,000 Indian farmers. If emissions are reduced roughly in line with the global Paris climate change agreement, there would be no 35C WBT heatwaves and the population affected by the 31C WBT events falls from 75% to 55%. About 15% exposed are today.

[Read More on The Guardian](#)



Climate Change, Poverty, Migration: The New, Inhuman 'Bermuda Triangle'

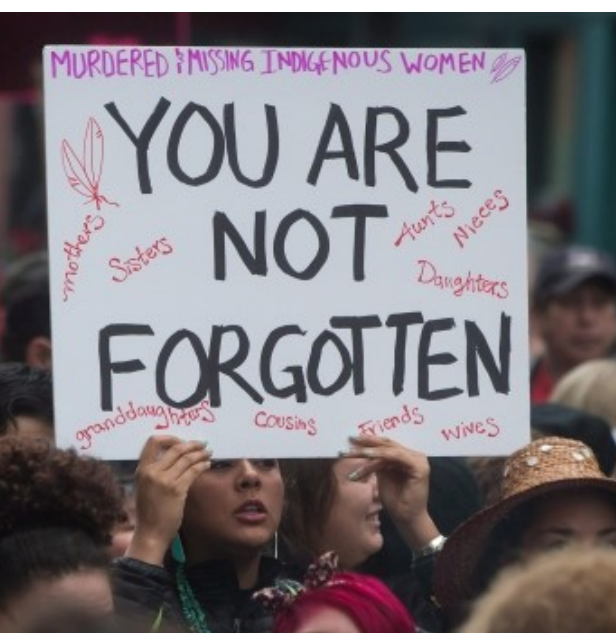
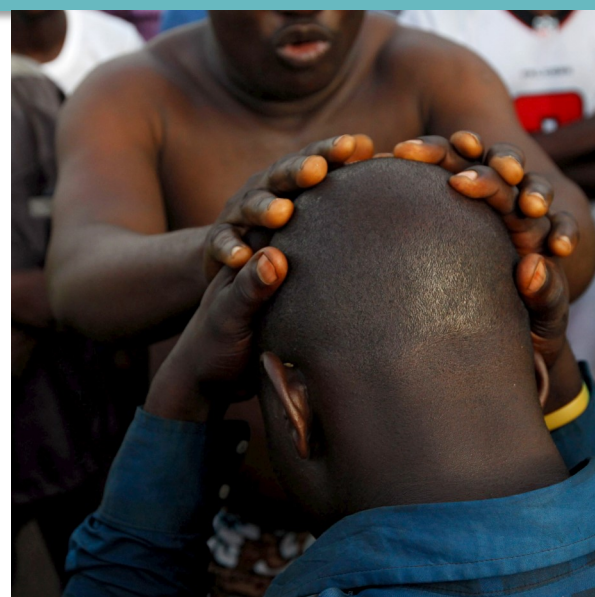
World organisations, experts and scientists have been repeating it to satiety: climate change poses a major risk to the poorest rural populations in developing countries, dangerously threatening their lives and livelihoods and thus forcing them to migrate. Also that the billions of dollars that the major industrialised powers, those who are mainly responsible for climate change, spend on often illegal, inhumane measures aiming at impeding the arrival of migrants and refugees to their countries, could be devoted instead to preventing the root causes of massive human displacements. One such a solution is to invest in sustainable agriculture. On this, the world's leading body in the fields of food and agriculture has once again warned that climate change often leads to distress-driven migration, while stressing that promoting sustainable agriculture is an essential part of an effective policy response.

[Read More on IPS News Agency](#)

SPOTLIGHT ON POLICY: WHAT WITCH DOCTORS CAN TEACH US ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Bulletproofing spells are just one of many military and civilian spells present in the Eastern DRC. Sanchez de la Sierra and Nunn are now working to develop experiments to show how these beliefs map onto behaviour. Those who are under a protection spell would have less of a physical reaction if they believe in the protection than if they only claim to in order to meet societal expectations. Understanding belief formation could inform policy recommendations in the region and beyond. He draws a parallel between witchcraft in a place like the Eastern DRC and science in western nations to demonstrate how understanding belief formation can help us understand recent political phenomena. But the need for the political process to legitimize scientists and witch doctors makes them vulnerable to the legitimacy of political processes themselves. For example, as rising populism causes citizens to disengage from western political systems, scientists are seen as part of the elite and their research as contrary to the interests of the people. Sanchez de la Sierra cites beliefs about climate change as a prime example.

[Read More on CIFAR](#)



SPOTLIGHT ON INDIGENOUS HEALTH: THE CONFUSION BEHIND INQUIRY INTO MURDERED AND MISSING INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN CANADA

The troubled National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls has long been an idea at war with itself. When Canada's Liberal government set up the inquiry last year, it hoped the commissioners it appointed would somehow be able to provide some form of comfort to real, individual Indigenous families who have lost female relatives and want to know what happened to them. However it was a difficult task. The inquiry is in chaos. Five senior officials, including one commissioner, have quit. The remaining four commissioners narrowly escaped a motion of censure from the influential Assembly of First Nations, which wants the inquiry's terms of reference rewritten. Many of the families of the missing and murdered argue, understandably, that the best way to honour their relatives is to find out what happened to them. A significant number say they are not satisfied with police explanations.

[Read More on The Star](#)



QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“Women and girls have a human right to choose whether and when to become pregnant. When they do not have access to high quality contraceptive and fertility care services and information to help them plan for their families, their health and well-being can suffer.”

Ian Askew, Director, WHO Department of Reproductive Health and Research including UNDP UNFPA UNICEF WHO World Bank Special Programme of Research Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction.

[Read More on World Health Organization](#)



EVENTSTABLE

DATE	CONFERENCE	LOCATION	REGISTER
Aug.	WHO Courses for Outbreaks and Emergencies	eLearning	https://openwho.org/?utm_source=WHO+List&utm_campaign=0fc02df114-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_07_17&utm_medium=email&utm_te
Sept 25-27	Canadian Association of Community Health Centres 2017 Conference	Calgary Canada	https://www.cachc.ca/2017conference/?utm_source=CACHC+e-News&utm_campaign=95ef99308c-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_06_20&utm_medium=email&utm_te rm=0_78768ad041-95ef99308c-306041945
Sept 29	Governance of Pharmaceuticals Policy Workshop	Toronto Canada	http://www.pharmacy.utoronto.ca/whocc
Oct 29-31	Canadian Conference for Global Health	Montreal Canada	http://www.ccgh-csih.ca/ccgh2015/index



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SIDELINING SCIENCE SINCE DAY ONE: HOW THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION HAS HARMED PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY IN ITS FIRST SIX MONTHS



A clear pattern has emerged over the first six months of the Trump presidency: multiple actions by his administration are eroding the ability of science, facts, and evidence to inform policy decisions, leaving us more vulnerable to threats to public health and the environment.

The Trump administration is attempting to delegitimize science, it is giving industries more ability to influence how and what science is used in policymaking, and it is creating a hostile environment for federal agency scientists who serve the public. This is a new era in which political interference in science is more likely and more frequent and will present serious risks to the health and safety of the American people. The science community and the general public have responded vigorously: standing up for science, calling out “alternative facts,” articulating the importance of science-based policymaking, and marching in the streets. Sustained engagement will be necessary to prevent the most significant damage.

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) has long advocated for strong principles of scientific integrity in the federal government to ensure that science can serve society fully. Scientific integrity includes not only the ability of scientists to perform and communicate their work freely but also the ability of policymakers and the public to access unvarnished scientific information and utilize it to advance the public interest. It is a process by which independent science fully and transparently informs policy decisions, free from inappropriate political, ideological, financial, or other undue influence. When the federal government does not uphold principles of scientific integrity, our nation’s ability to respond effectively to complex challenges to public health, the environment, and national security is compromised.

Furthermore, the loss of scientific integrity in federal agencies can create hostile environments for scientists, often chilling basic scientific activities. Most important, a loss of scientific integrity betrays the public’s trust in our government and undermines the democratic principles upon which this nation was founded. Political interference in science is not new. All modern presidents have politicized science to some extent. Past administrations and their allies have falsified, fabricated, or suppressed evidence, selectively and deceptively edited documents, exaggerated uncertainty, tampered with scientific procedures, allowed conflicts of interest to interfere with decision-making, let political considerations drive science advisory board appointments, targeted essential data collection initiatives for elimination, and intimidated, censored, and coerced scientists. Under the Trump administration, these threats to the federal scientific enterprise have escalated markedly.

[Read More on UCSUSA](#)



MARGERET CHAN'S TEN YEARS IN PUBLIC HEALTH 2007-2017



Ten years in public health 2007-2017 chronicles the evolution of global public health over the decade that I have served as Director-General at the World Health Organization. This series of chapters evaluates successes, setbacks, and enduring challenges during my administration. They show what needs to be done when progress stalls or new threats emerge. The chapters show how WHO technical leadership can get multiple partners working together in tandem under coherent strategies. The importance of country leadership and community engagement is stressed repeatedly throughout the chapters. Together we have made tremendous progress.

Health and life expectancy have improved nearly everywhere. Millions of lives have been saved. The number of people dying from malaria and HIV has been cut in half. WHO efforts to stop TB saved 49 million lives since the start of this century. In 2015, the number of child deaths dropped below 6 million for the first time, a 50% decrease in annual deaths since 1990. Every day 19,000 fewer children die. We are able to count these numbers because of the culture of measurement and accountability instilled in WHO. The challenges facing health in the 21st century are unprecedented in their complexity and universal in their impact. Under the pressures of demographic ageing, rapid urbanization, and the globalized marketing of unhealthy products, chronic noncommunicable diseases have overtaken infectious diseases as the leading killers worldwide. Increased political attention to combat heart attacks and stroke, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases is welcome as a powerful way to improve longevity and healthy life expectancy. However, no country in the world has managed to turn its obesity epidemic around in all age groups. I personally welcome the political attention being given to women, their health needs, and their contributions to society. Investment in women and girls has a ripple effect. All of society wins in the end.

The chapters reveal another shared priority for WHO: fairness in access to care as an ethical imperative. No one should be denied access to life-saving or health-promoting interventions for unfair reasons, including those with economic or social causes. That principle is profoundly demonstrated in WHO's work on universal health coverage, which in the past decade has expanded from a focus on primary health care to the inclusion of UHC as a core element of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Health has a central place in the global goals. Importantly, countries have committed to this powerful social equalizer. Universal health coverage reflects the spirit of the SDGs and is the ultimate expression of fairness, ensuring no one is left behind. These chapters tell a powerful story of global challenges and how they have been overcome. In a world facing considerable uncertainty, international health development is a unifying – and uplifting – force for the good of humanity. I have been proud to witness this impressive spirit of collaboration and global solidarity.

*Dr Margaret Chan
Director General, WHO*

[Read More on World Health Organization](#)



SPERM COUNT HAS FALLEN BY NEARLY 60 PERCENT IN RICHER COUNTRIES

Fact: 59 countries have total fertility rates below the sustaining level.



Including 3 of 4
BRIC nations



An analysis of research into male fertility suggests that there has been a steep decline in sperm counts for men living in richer nations.

The review pooled data from 185 different studies, and found a 59.3 per cent drop between 1973 and 2011 in the average amount of sperm produced by men from North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. No similar pattern was seen in South America, Asia and Africa, although fewer studies had been conducted in these countries.

“Given the importance of sperm counts for male fertility and human health, this study is an urgent wake-up call for researchers and health authorities around the world to investigate the causes of the sharp, ongoing drop in sperm count,” says Hagai Levine, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who worked on the analysis. “The fact that the decline is seen in Western countries strongly suggests that chemicals in commerce are playing a causal role in this trend,” says team-member Shanna Swan, of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York.

Exposure to chemicals in the womb, adult exposure to pesticides, smoking, stress and obesity have all previously been linked to lower sperm counts. But previous studies reporting falling sperm counts have been challenged by some for being unreliable.

“Previous smaller studies have suffered from confounding factors, including the fact that methods of counting sperm in the laboratory might have changed over the years, or that the populations of men being studied might have changed,” says Daniel Brison, at the University of Manchester, UK.

“This new analysis overcomes those problems by including a large number of studies of varying design and location around the world, to confirm that the decline in sperm counts is likely to be real,” says Brison.

[Read More on New Scientist](#)

ALL PART OF THE PROBLEM: OUR COLLECTIVE WASTES OF ENERGY



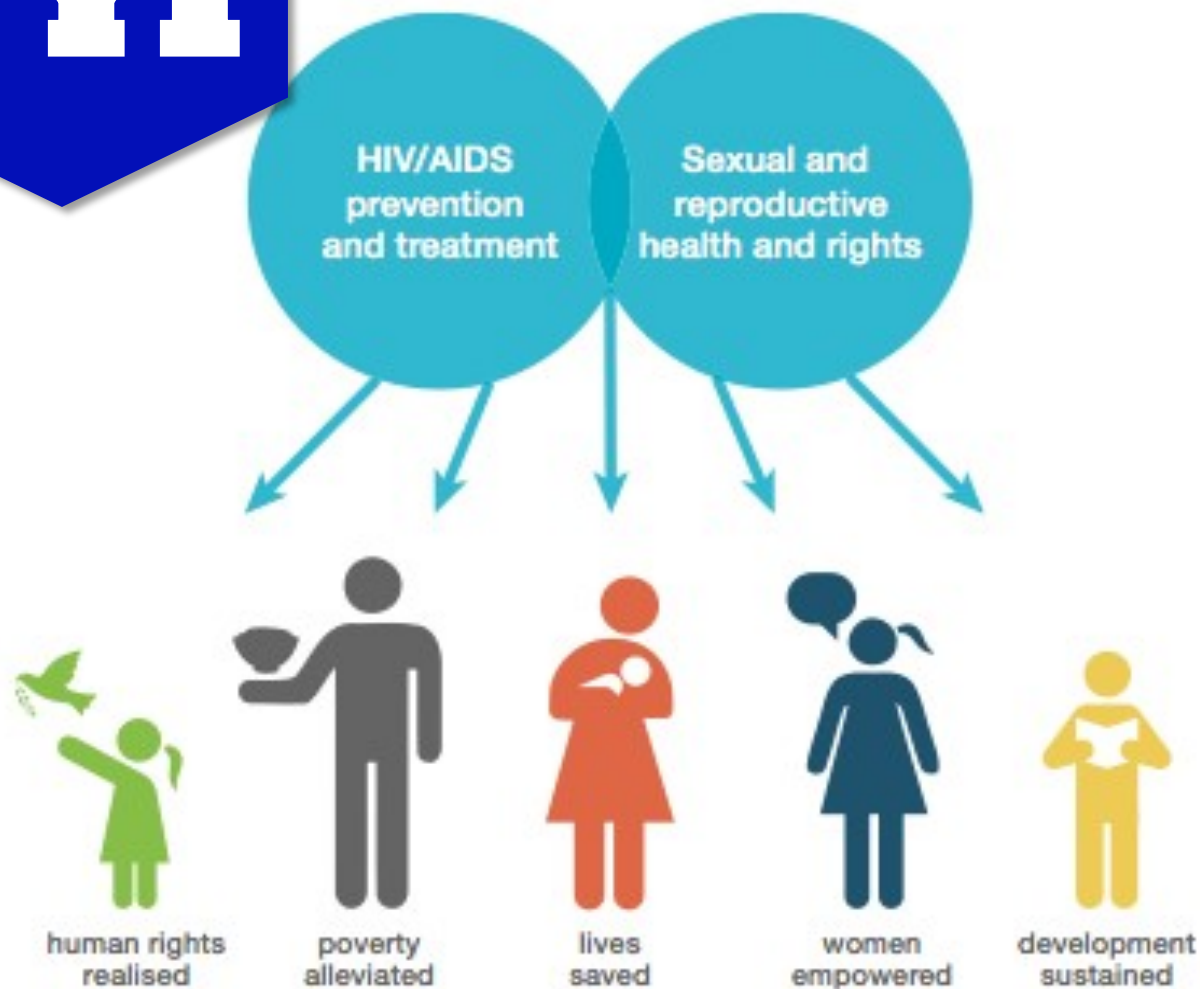
Using comic strips Stuart McMillen illustrates how most people are totally unaware of the ‘human equivalent’ of energy that they waste on a daily basis. His energy slave comics hope to bring sharper focus onto this concept.

“One of my major aims was helping people to see that they are as much of the problem as anyone else. Energy slaves power so much more than just the obvious things like cars and planes. They invisibly allow *our entire lifestyles* to exist. But I want to make it clear that it is not just these ‘villains’ who are the wasteful ones. It is not just the ‘petrolheads’ and playboys who are to blame. We are all shocking wastes of energy slaves.”

[To See McMillen's Comics Read More on Stuart McMillen](#)



REPORT FROM THE 2017 FAMILY PLANNING SUMMIT



Women and girls have a human right to choose whether and when to become pregnant. When they do not have access to high quality contraceptive and fertility care services and information to help them plan their families, their health and well-being can suffer. At the 2017 Family Planning Summit policy-makers, leaders, donors and contraception advocates came together to discuss how to intensify efforts in order to meet global goals for family planning.

The world now has the largest ever cohort of adolescents in history. If their sexual and reproductive health needs are met and in particular, their needs for contraception information and services, their future well-being, as well as the well-being and economic security of their families, communities and countries, will be vastly improved. On the occasion of the Summit, a commentary was published to highlight the data gaps and opportunities for action to improve and safeguard adolescents' sexual and reproductive health.

A series of Evidence Briefs was launched by HRP/WHO, the STEP-UP Programme, Population Council and DFID to share and summarise the latest best evidence on what works to improve access, availability and choice of family planning for girls and women.

[Read More on World Health Organization](#)



FOR MENTAL FITNESS, TAKE A HIKE



Studies show that reconnecting with nature can make us happier, smarter, and healthier especially if it's in an unfamiliar place.

The Waldorf School of the Peninsula, a private school in the Bay Area, is a technology-free zone. There are no tablets, no cell phones, no screens of any kind. Instead, the bookshelves are lined with encyclopedias and the classrooms outfitted with blackboards and chalk. Even the most tech-savvy community in the country acknowledges the value of time away from our screens. Yet most of us are all too attached to our devices. A Gallup Poll found 52 per cent of smartphone owners check their device several times an hour, and 63 per cent of adults keep their phones beside them as they sleep. This constant, increasingly reflexive reliance on technology is chipping away at our quality of life.

Gregory Bratman, a graduate student at the Emmett Interdisciplinary Program in Environment and Resources at Stanford University, has taken the digital detox one step farther. After studying the psychological effects of urban living, Bratman and his colleagues found that volunteers who walked briefly through a lush, green portion of the Stanford campus were more attentive and happier afterward than volunteers who strolled for the same amount of time near heavy traffic. His study suggests that by putting away our devices for a short time and putting ourselves in nature, we can ultimately attain a clearer, less anxious state of mind.

Even better than a stroll through your backyard is hiking in a remote patch of green. Psychologists and neuroscientists have discovered there is truth to the old saying "Travel broadens the mind." New sights, sounds, and smells affect our neural pathways, forging new connections in our brains that help refresh our minds. "Foreign experiences increase both cognitive flexibility and depth and intergrativeness of thought, the ability to make deep connections between disparate forms," said Adam Galinsky, a professor at Columbia Business School. And travel alleviates stress. According to Dr. Margaret J. King, director of the Center for Cultural Studies & Analysis, a change of scene gives our minds a chance to relax and reset. So, the next time you need to recharge, step away from your smartphone and step out into the great outdoors to discover a new culture.

[Read More on The New Yorker](#)

Finback Whale
Near St. Andrews by the Sea, Bay of Fundy, New Brunswick
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