

Watt's Happening? #118

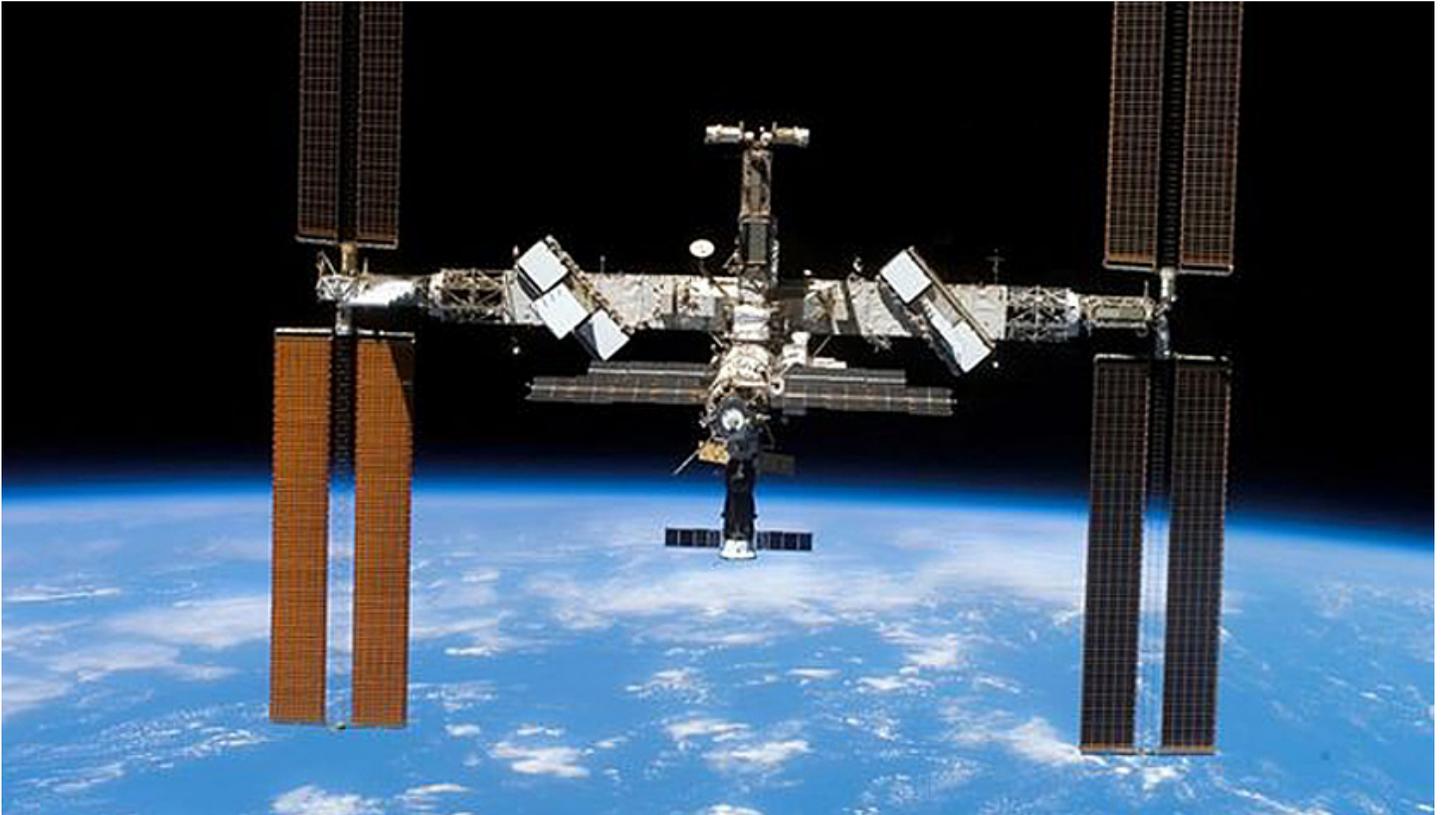
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Earth In Human Hands



From a cosmic perspective, the human species has been re-shaping the Earth for a long time, but now we are doing it as never before, on a planet-wide scale. Can we awaken to our new role as planet-shapers?

Geo-engineering: intentionally taking whole planetary systems and changing them to our benefit.

Presently a controversial topic as we scramble for engineering approaches to halt climate change, from blocking sunlight with high altitude aerosols to seeding the oceans with nutrients to entice algae to bloom and suck up carbon.

The thing is, we're already geo-engineering the Earth, but we're just not conscious of it. So says David Grinspoon in his new book, *Earth in Human Hands*.

Grinspoon is an astrobiologist, which means he studies life on this and other planets. From the distance of astrobiology, humans have been busily reshaping our environment to better meet our needs ever since we've been around, but now we're

doing it on a planetary, whole-earth scale. The problem is that we're only just beginning to wake up to this fact, and realize that, whether we like it or not, we're now in control of Planet Earth.

"It's a challenging moment for human civilization," says Grinspoon. "The great restless cleverness of our species has gotten us into a tough spot. Our collective actions, over which we often have little control, threaten

the well being of many of our fellow humans, not to mention vast numbers of our more distant biological relatives. Our very survival may be threatened.”

If we’re so smart, why are we in this mess? Because, he says, we are stumbling along without clearly seeing what we are doing, operating on a scale we have no experience with.

We have, unconsciously, been making a new planet. Our challenge now it to awaken to this new reality, and become conscious shapers of our world.

“We have to ‘human up’ and accept the responsibility we’ve stumbled into. We didn’t ask for this. And we may not be up for the challenge, but at this point we have no choice.”

Happily, Grinspoon thinks we actually ARE up to it. He uses the example of how we avoided global catastrophe by averting the destruction of Earth’s protective ozone layer.

Without the ozone layer, Earth would be bathed in intense ultraviolet radiation causing an epidemic of cancer deaths and crop failures. But dire warnings from the world’s scientists and quick action from government and industry phased out dangerous CFCs. Meetings were held. Agreements were signed. We found safer replacements. The ozone holes are now decreasing in size and should be healed (as long as we stay vigilant) by mid-century.

This is important. If you want to see what a planet is like without an ozone layer, check out Mars. Remember, life on Earth was confined to the oceans for a very long time because the land was sterilized by Mars-like solar radiation. Earth’s ozone shield, a by-product of the first oxygen released from ocean

life some two billion years ago, made the land surface habitable. And here we are.

When we released CFCs into the atmosphere, we began to reverse this process and destroy our radiation shield. We were inadvertently tinkering with one of Earth’s vital life support systems. We did not intend to destroy it. It did not happen because we are an “evil” species. We actually thought CFCs were a good thing. But instead we were performing very dangerous, unconscious geo-engineering.

Now it’s time to wake up, says Grinspoon. We are engineering our whole planet without awareness of what we are doing.

“...our obligation now is to move beyond just lamenting the job we’ve done as reluctant, incompetent planet-shapers. We have to face the fact that we have become a planetary force, and figure out how to be a better one. ...we are not stuck, just disoriented, not evil, just confused, struggling to find our way in a world increasingly of our own making . . . We’ve been building an expanding,

rapidly changing civilization on a finite world with no long-term plan. Our challenge is to acknowledge, with clear eyes, the tough predicament we’re in, and not to succumb to toxic fatalism. Our most valuable resources – creativity, communication, invention and reinvention — are in fact unlimited.”

If you’re looking for a good jolt of positive energy and hope, (and who isn’t) and a truly cosmic perspective of life on Earth and our place in it, have a look at *Earth in Human Hands*. I think he’s nailed it.

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