Science & Technology

Inherit the Wind (and Rain)

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Newborns, welcome to planet Earth. We're sorry for the mess.

Here's the situation: seven million children under the age of five die of preventable causes each year. One-third of humanity lives in countries where drinking-water supplies are under stress. Carbon emissions are at an all-time high, and Arctic ice cover is in rapid retreat. Last year, 2011, was a record year for floods, droughts, and wildfires. And in a mere dozen years, Earth's human population will increase by one billion.

These were some of the facts imparted by the speakers at the 2012 State of the Planet Conference, held by Columbia's Earth Institute before eight hundred people (and another two thousand by webcast) in Lerner Hall on October 11. The four-hour program took a hard look at the many threats now staring down humanity, Earth, and life as we know it.

For Jeffrey D. Sachs, the Earth Institute's director, the day's topic may have felt particularly personal.

"Jeff Sachs became a grandfather last night," said keynote speaker Jan Eliasson, deputy secretary-general of the United Nations. "I say it not only to congratulate you," Eliasson continued, addressing a grinning Sachs in the front row, "but to remind us what this is all about: our grandchildren. They're the reason we have to make life acceptable, and even pleasant, and in the best case wonderful for Siena and her colleagues and friends when she takes over and sits in this hall some years from now."

Throughout the day, speakers did their best to find upsides to desperate situations. Christiana Figueres, the executive secretary of the United Nations Framework

Convention on Climate Change and one of many speakers to appear via video, said that melting ice, droughts, and wildfires are raising public awareness of the climate crisis.

“Now we have 70 percent of the population in the United States that recognizes that climate change is occurring,” Figueres said. The proportion of believers is higher in the rest of the world, she reported: 89 percent in Europe, 86 percent in India, and 93 percent in China.

On a day when technological solutions were in the spotlight, Figueres fell prey to technical glitches: seemingly unable to hear anyone in the hall, she continued speaking for five minutes after the moderator, *BBC World News* anchor Laura Trevelyan, asked her twice to conclude her remarks, prompting nervous laughter from the audience. But mostly, the technology worked, allowing speakers from as far away as Nigeria, Kazakhstan, and Brazil to talk about sustainability efforts in their regions.

James Hansen, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies at Columbia, found a silver lining to America’s rising gasoline prices.

“As long as fossil fuels are the cheapest energies, we’ll keep burning them and we won’t solve the problem,” he said. “You have to get people to understand that it’s in their interest to have an honest price on fossil fuels so that the alternatives can compete.”

As for Sachs, he didn’t share any thoughts about his granddaughter with the audience — at least not explicitly. But he drew the day’s most enthusiastic applause with a diatribe against the fossil-fuel industry, lobbyists, and the op-ed page of the *Wall Street Journal*.

“So, who runs the show?” he said, his voice rising. “The companies. What drives the companies? Of course their profit motive. What underpins what the companies do? Their technologies. If the technologies can be made sustainable, we can find a happy solution.” He stated that the whole economy is based on a fossil fuel–based energy sector, “and there is no lobby in the world more powerful than Big Coal, Big Oil, and Big Natural Gas. We face that in the *Wall Street Journal* pages every day.

“We need new technologies, we need practical solutions, we need the corporate propaganda to stop,” he said.

For the sake of our grandkids.

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