

POWER OF ONE



Feeling politically depressed and overwhelmed? **Peter Laurenson** says the antidote isn't looking away – it's taking action, one choice at a time.

It's all about the economy." That's how Christopher Luxon opened his position statement in the first leaders' debate of the 2023 election, and I don't know how many times since then he's repeated it during his term as our Prime Minister. In his victory speech on election night, Luxon made no mention of conservation, sustainability, climate change response, or wealth inequity. The scene was set, perhaps even more extremely than many of us could have anticipated.

Mainstream media coverage is usually no better. Too often, what is reported is the dollar value of this event or that, virtually never the environmental impact. A classic example stood out for me on 15 September 2024 when Jim Mora interviewed a Kiwi who had purchased a cabin on a cruise ship that would take her and her husband on a three-and-a-half year cruise around the world, visiting 425 ports and 147 countries. The banter was along the lines of "you only live once" and "an affordable new way of living", but the climate cost of that big-scale cruising didn't rate a mention.

Nearly all holiday-making involves escalated CO₂ emissions. But land-based vacations, even with plane and car travel, are overwhelmingly less polluting than getting on a cruise ship. Friends of the Earth undertook a study released in April 2023 comparing the CO₂ emissions of land-based vacationers to cruise ship ones. An average land-based vacationer emitted 51.88kg per day.



Peter Laurenson in 2025. © Peter Laurenson

A premium land-based vacationer was higher at 81.33kg. A cruise ship vacationer emitted 421.43kg per day – five to eight times more.

It doesn't matter how much greenwashing cruise ship companies spin about reducing plastic use, using less energy onboard, and so on. They can't wish away their greatest impact on CO₂ emissions – the massive volume and low quality of fuel they use. There are people today who choose to make their permanent home a cruise ship. Whether consciously or otherwise, they are also choosing to emit more CO₂ per capita every day than almost everyone else on Earth.

I've found the style and consequences of recent politics, both here at home and internationally – particularly the damage to our environment and intensifying wealth inequity – to be deeply disturbing. I'm just an individual in a crowd of 8.2 billion. It's easy to feel overwhelmed, and many around the world today do. You don't have to live in Ukraine, Palestine, Iran, or in poverty to still feel it.

As a coping mechanism, some shut it all out, but I believe it's important to be aware of what's going on, even if it is disturbing. If you're not, then how can you know how to be a part of the solution rather than part of the problem? Another challenge is finding a way to avoid being dragged down by that knowledge.

Something I've come to fully understand and appreciate with

age is how privileged I am. I was born lucky – a white male, in a safe provincial town in New Zealand, into a prosperous family where education was valued. I never had to worry about food, clothing, shelter, personal safety, or prejudice. Doors opened for me.

Sure, I worked hard and made mostly good choices, and now here I am. Arnold Schwarzenegger was on to it when he pointed out that the "self-made man" is a myth. Along with about 13% of Kiwis, I sit in the economically wealthiest 10% of humanity. This group of about 800 million people controls 75% of global wealth and pumps out half of all carbon emissions.

While the significant majority of people around the globe simply struggle to get by or even survive, I enjoy the privilege to choose how I live – what I consume, what I waste, where I live, who I vote for, who I invest in, where and how I travel, how I use my leisure time. And I've come to see that this freedom to choose lies at the heart of the solutions to all our global woes.

It's the incredible combined wealth of the top 10%, and our influence that, if harnessed in constructive ways, will solve humanity's problems. Of course, "constructive" cannot be

separated from "environmentally sustainable", and too many of our current political and corporate leaders and mainstream media still fail to sufficiently reflect this.

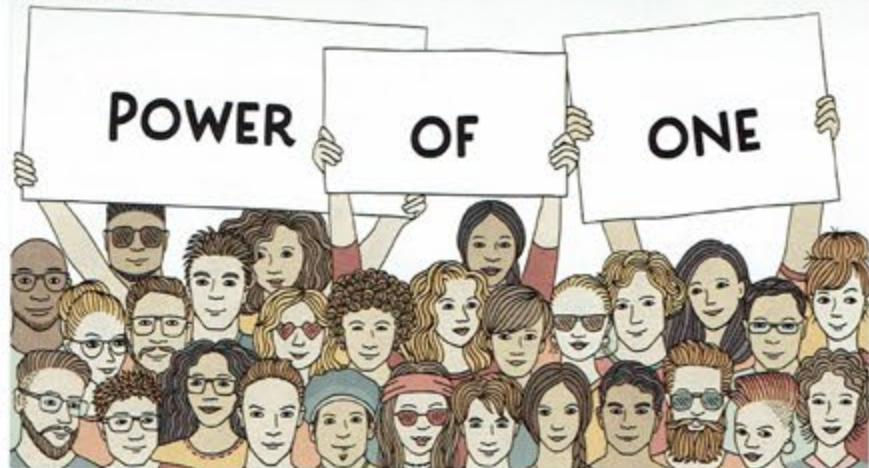
A recent article by *Guardian* writer Ash Sanders looked at political depression – the emotional impact on individuals who confront the unnecessary yet still escalating human self-destructiveness unfolding around us. Brett Ford, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Toronto quoted in the article, explained that while feeling bad about the state of the world doesn't feel good it is realistic – and even motivating.

"Negative emotions are a consistent predictor of political engagement and action. When people volunteer, donate, and protest, positive emotions like compassion, admiration, and pride sustain their work, and taking action leads to more feelings of agency, efficacy, and alignment with their values," he said.

For me, taking constructive and potentially effective action is my coping mechanism. If the problems confronting us are so disturbing to me, I can hardly object while doing nothing. I say "potentially" because anything I do as one individual will make little difference, but if



Feeling bad about the state of politics can lead to positive action. © NTB



→ combined with the constructive actions of enough others it will make all the difference.

I appreciate that the vast majority of readers of *Forest & Bird* already agree with me on that score – you support *Forest & Bird*, and many of you are personally involved in the impressive array of conservation projects undertaken by the *Forest & Bird* community. And thank you very much for that!

Thankfully, you're not alone. The Department of Conservation, other organisations such as Federated Mountain Clubs, the Environmental Defence Society, NZ Fish & Game, as well as hundreds of outdoor clubs and environmental support groups, citizen science efforts, and volunteers also contribute to the protection and restoration of natural environments across the land.

They are saving endangered species, installing and servicing predator trap lines, controlling wilding pines, restoring indigenous forests and wetlands. But positive actions can be taken in our personal lives too. Here are some of mine.

GOING VEGETARIAN

The first everyday action I decided to take was to become a “nearly vegan” in 2020. Although I realised after a time that to forego cheese and milk chocolate was a bridge too far, I've been pleasantly amazed at how delicious, varied, and sustaining a plant-based diet is.

All the rhetoric I've been subjected to during my life about how essential meat is to a healthy diet and to my identity as a “real bloke” is now revealed for the industry-self-interested marketing lie that it is.

Danish political scientist Bjørn Lomborg reported that, if everyone in the developed world became vegetarians, we could reduce global carbon emissions by about 4%. Yes, some commercial sectors will need to adapt, but our economies will not be curtailed and we would shift slightly towards a more sustainable way of living.

LOCALISE, REDUCE, RECYCLE

My partner and I actively seek out locally produced groceries to reduce transport emissions and support local businesses.

We opt for goods in recyclable packaging and aim to reuse or recycle when we can. By combining the recycling system available via our local council with a compost bin, each of our (once-weekly) waste rubbish bags takes about two months to fill these days.

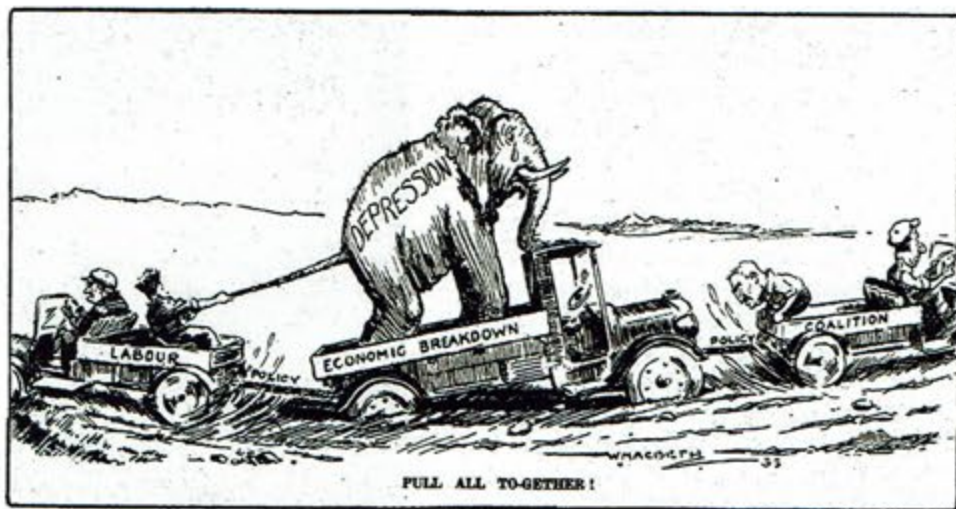
We have also established a vegetable garden capable of growing some of what we need, thereby reducing a little of what must otherwise be transported and packaged.

HARNESS THE SUN

Our home is powered entirely by electricity, aside from a gas barbecue. Our 28 solar panels generate slightly more electricity annually than we use, though seasonal variation means we still draw from the grid.

Our solar power system will pay for itself in about 15 years, but we didn't choose to install it primarily to reduce our living costs. Our main motivation was carbon footprint reduction.

I do reflect though that, if government and power company policies and actions were more supportive, affordable clean electricity via solar power would be in reach of many more New Zealanders while reducing our reliance on fossil fuels.



“Pull all together”, New Zealand cartoon, 1933. © National Opinion

VEHICLE CHOICE

We work from home so need to drive cars little. We haven't invested in an electric vehicle yet, because we can see that the carbon footprint of prematurely bringing any new vehicle (EV or not) into the world is greater than from infrequently driving an existing petrol-powered one that is well maintained to ensure clean running.

When the time eventually arrives to buy a replacement, it will be an EV. By then, I hope battery and recycling technologies will be up to the challenge and that we can buy second-hand.

TRAVEL LESS

We intend to travel internationally in our retirement years much less than we thought we might a few years back. And when we do, we'll make the token payments into airline carbon offset schemes.

You might ask, “Why travel internationally at all then?” One of my sons plans to live long-term in Europe. Never travelling again could mean never seeing him. But significantly reducing our travel is still a positive step.

INVEST FOR GOOD

We choose to invest in companies and managed funds that have clearly stated “triple bottom lines” that place environmental and social imperatives on the same footing as commercial ones, and we vote for politicians who do the same.

VOTE FOR NATURE

While it's the actions of big corporates and leadership of governments that can make the really big changes essential for humanity to roll back the global warming now unfolding, we must remember that corporates are driven by profit, derived from individual consumers and investors



The Three Kings, Mitre, and Baldy ridge at dawn, viewed from Jumbo Hut, Tararua Forest Park. © Peter Laurensen

– us. Governments are elected and influenced by individual voters and lobbyists – us. And both governments and corporates are powered by employees – us. That's why it's important to vote for parties that prioritise the environment and invest in nature-based policies to help communities adapt to climate change impacts while also restoring local biodiversity.

SPEAK UP

Two educators also quoted in Sanders' *Guardian* article were violinist Rebecca McFaul and her husband, physics professor Rob Davies, who use art and education to inspire their students to create a different world. Their *Crossroads Project*, a performance weaving together science, art, and music, seeks to help people understand the perils the world is facing and act in its defence.

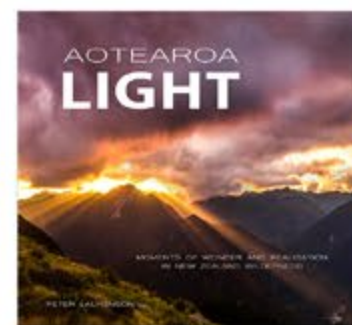
That certainly resonates with me. It's one of the reasons I produced my latest book *Aotearoa Light: Moments of wonder and realisation in New Zealand wilderness*.

As a photographer, I've come to understand that photographic images can be a powerful force of good. Not only do they allow me to relive and share wonderful experiences, they can tell stories, provoke thought, and inspire individual and collective positive action. And in this Trumpian world we now live in, the more of that the better.

I list our actions not to imply we're doing anything noble. We still enjoy privileged lives. There is always more we could do to reduce our personal carbon footprints, yet we also wish to continue enjoying the rest of our days.

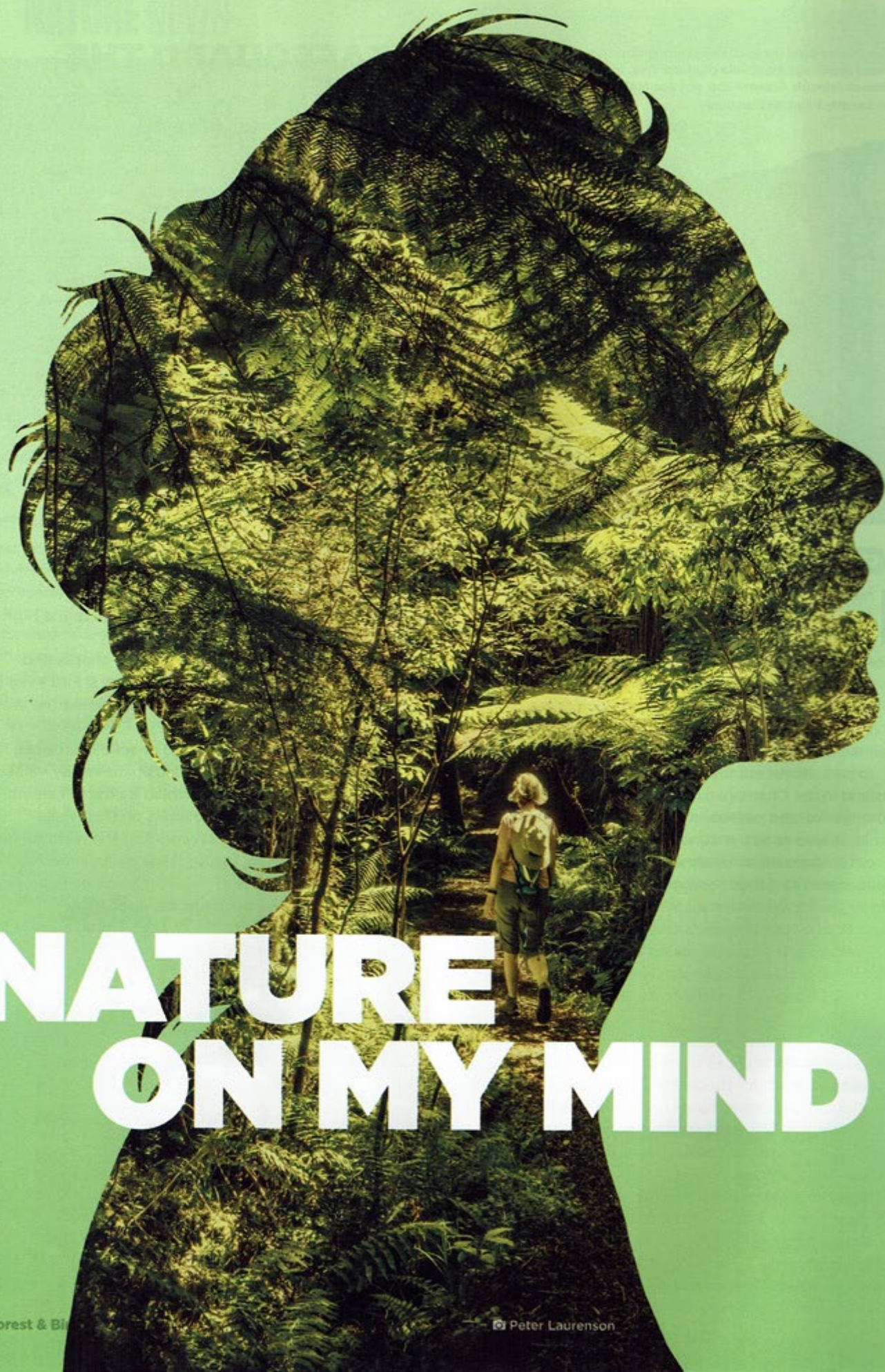
The solution to curtailing human-induced global warming is not defined by all or nothing. Whether the choice is to go vegan or just reduce meat consumption, go solar or just try harder to use grid-sourced electricity more frugally, it all counts.

Imagine if all the 800 million people in the economic top 10% chose to take the actions I've described. Imagine the collective impact that would make.



Peter Laurensen is a keen trapper, climber, and outdoor photographer. He is the editor of FMC's *Backcountry* magazine and author of three books.

What personal actions have you taken to restore nature or the climate recently? Write to editor@forestandbird.org.nz. We'd love to hear from you.



NATURE ON MY MIND