Dr. Read started his presentation with a few words on the seriousness of our situation. In particular, he highlighted one of the key findings of an upcoming analysis conducted by his colleague Jem Bendell detailing the threats to the global food system. One of the key findings was that parts of the world which have been previously considered as more or less impervious to food shocks have now become quite vulnerable to disruptions in the food supply, with South and Central America standing out as particularly vulnerable. Unfortunately, once the world crosses 1.5ºC of warming, it may become increasingly challenging for countries to feed themselves: a looming threat that could even impact countries such as the U.K., which currently imports a substantial amount of its food and could become quite vulnerable if the world experienced a multi-breadbasket failure with major exporting countries enacting food export bans. Dr. Read compared this impending food crisis with the COVID crisis to posit that rich, western nations may actually have more to fear from any such shock as their systems are more complex and hence more brittle.

He then shifted to begin a discussion of climate change as an issue that the electorate cares about and feels compelled to vote on.
In Dr. Read’s telling, Greta Thunberg changed the way that the world thinks about climate change in 2019 when she set off the spark of a global climate movement. This has permanently shifted the Overton window, making possible a further set of moves. Dr. Read suggested that the radical flank would never constitute a plurality of the voters, much less a majority. Therefore, in order to confront the threat before us, it becomes necessary to involve a larger proportion of the population at a more meaningful level, involving people who don’t think of themselves as activists.

Dr. Read cites some evidence that this may be more feasible than we first think. Already, a sizable proportion of the population believes that climate change is happening and is a serious problem. This engagement is quite shallow, however, suggesting that it should be deepened and activated. He further suggests that it is imperative that the movement eschew a focus on elite, top-down messaging, instead focusing on people-to-people connections with others who are trusted. Once this work is able to reach people through strong, interpersonal connections via families, workplaces, businesses and religious organizations, then we have a chance of building a climate majority in the electorate that is willing to take action.

His new organization, Incubator, has started to support two different initiatives. One, Lawyers for Net Zero, focuses on getting lawyers to organize as lawyers and pressure their firms to support net zero goals. Incubator has also supported community organizations powered by people to people messaging.

Climate change is a multifaceted problem spanning both space and time. There is no quick fix, meaning that contrary to what scientists, technologists, and radical flank activists say, there is going to be a lot of pain and a lot of degradation. Chances of failure, chances of collapse, are high, with fundamental decline in the near term also highly probable. Despite this challenge set, there remains much work to do to help ensure that an organized, aware electorate is able to take command of the situation and prevent things from getting even worse.
MEER COMMUNITY QUESTIONS

- How can you get the message about the truth of climate change across while also keeping hope on an individual level alive?
  - A: Dr. Read thinks that scare tactics are the correct path forward. It is better to have a container around people’s fear to make it manageable. It must give them meaningful off-ramps from the fear and a sense that those actions will add up to something sufficient to address the fear. Unless you have all of those things addressing the fear, it won't actually enable proper action to take place. You have to make substantial and serious offers, not just, for example, taking shorter showers which everyone knows won’t cut it.

- How do you deal with the fact that climate change is such an urgent issue when grassroots movements will take a long time?
  - A: Professor Read responds that it is correct that people ought to make better political choices and there ought to be better policies. That said, it requires an enormous act of faith to think that is what is going to happen. Professor Read was in COP26, and what he saw was a really pitiful failure to step up to the plate at a critical moment in history. COP26 was the moment that the COPs were supposed to implement the Paris Agreement in earnest. Boris Johnson said at the beginning of the COP that it was 1 minute to midnight. Sooner or later, when you have missed the last chance, then it is over. We are in fact in a situation where we are barreling straight towards an apocalyptic situation. Professor Read doesn’t share the faith that there will be in any ordinary sense of the word, political solutions to this. That doesn’t mean work in this vein isn’t important; more that the importance of the political process is to make a terrible solution a little less bad. That isn't enough however. His solution to get more done is to create an epochal movement. This means that there will be enormous suffering and devastation in the next 10-20 years. How do we get a whole new political class? Frankly, you need a new electorate. You get a new electorate through profound cultural change. This is too slow of a process, but still the fastest process that is possible to imagine working. Young people hold some of the best promise for the future, and just as they have been mobilized, we should also seek to mobilize their parents.
What kinds of events in communities could be put on? Can we use social media and influence large businesses?

A: We can definitely use social media and influence businesses. The crucial question is to ask if it would be helpful. Sometimes it is not enough to try your best, sometimes you have to do enough (a quote attributed to Winston Churchill). Some businesses really are trying to do the right thing. There are businesses that need to be asked a whole host of questions asking about their emissions, vulnerabilities, what they are lobbying for, etc. Green consumerism is better than nothing at all, but we know that it isn’t enough, so people need to engage with these businesses directly. Lawyers play a very important role in corporations and will be listened to. If they were to say that they could be retroactively sued, for example, and influence one another, that is the type of thing that could really make a difference. The question we should ask is: What is the work that I can do when there is still time and maximum leverage to be exerted?

How do we identify and think about someone who has been “activated”?

A: In the 2020s, there are definitely going to be more climate and green activists. That is great, but it will never be enough. We need to provide serious ramps for people who would never consider becoming an activist to become “doists.” Finding creative ways to access and channel these energies is one of the most important things that could be done and is a central focus of Incubator. The sum total of these efforts will increase pressure for action to be taken.

What could be a concrete step that lawyers could advocate for?

A: The person who dreamed up Lawyers for Net Zero is not a lawyer, just someone who saw the potential in the law. So you don’t just have to be a lawyer for this to work. Climate and ecolitigation is hugely significant and a great way to invest time and money. It will never be enough, granted, but it is significant nonetheless. Lawyers can do pro bono work, refuse to represent certain clients. They can take steps in that direction and some lawyers are in fact taking those steps. There is a radical fringe of the moderate flank called “Lawyers Are Responsible” thus named for the sense that lawyers are to discern right from wrong and have countenanced many of the actions that have degraded the environment.
Given that it is very unlikely to avoid some tipping points, should the moderate flank put effort into intervention research?

A: Professor Read is on record as being strongly opposed to geoengineering. That said, Professor Read had the impression that the MEER proposal doesn’t really count as geoengineering in the way that atmospheric particle injection does as it is not an attempt to control the entire climate.* He is open to more research and technical demonstration processes in an experimental fashion. It is entirely possible here to go from the frying pan and into the fire if we don’t find ways of stopping the exploitation of ecosystems. This likely won’t happen and there is a strong possibility of collapse, although he hopes that we won’t. Ultimately what we need to do is build down and reduce planetary effects, not to think that we can continue to damage and continue to find technical fixes for that damage.

What would a future look like if that climate majority were realized?

A: This is such a hugely important question, and it is imperative to have that positive vision. We must also accept that we don’t have full control over the situation. Professor Read emphasizes that we cannot go on as we currently are, and in order to continue we must transform civilization such that it is no longer recognizable. Society will be much more local. People will have a sense of purpose and have a better sense of what life is for. There will be a better sense of our own vulnerability and less emphasis on endless material growth and technological reliance. There may be less “ease” than there is today, but hopefully this vision is sufficiently attractive as this would be a time of large potential meaning wherein things could actually start to improve.

*Note from MEER: Professor Read is mistaken in this assumption, as MEER’s cooling concept can operate on both local and global levels.