



# Andri Magnason's *The Story of the Blue Planet:* Toward Ecotopia

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## Abstract

The reflection describes my experience of using Andri Magnason's *The Story of the Blue Planet* as a hopeful guide toward classroom discussions about sustainable futures. Magnason's novel helps students appreciate the environmental choices we are currently facing and provides an outline for what needs to be done. Just like the children of the Blue Planet, we face similar challenges to overcome resistance to climate literacy and action. Magnason's message is hopeful and gestures at an ecotopian future. The book suggests that the choice to live sustainably is not as hard as it may seem.

## Keywords

[Anthropocene](#), [climate action](#), [consumer culture](#), [utopia](#), [dystopia](#), [ecotopia](#), [development](#), [greenwashing](#), [ecological overshoot](#), [ecological destruction](#), [system change](#), [degrowth](#), [ecotopia](#), [Story of the Blue Planet](#)

In August 2019, Icelandic author Andri Magnason and a group of his researcher friends placed a plaque at the top of Ok mountain commemorating the loss of the Ok glacier in Iceland. Titled "A letter to the future," the plaque acknowledges the loss of the glacier to human-driven climate change. It states boldly, "This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it" (Magnason, 2019). This challenge to actively protect the environment is at the heart of Magnason's work, especially his ecotopian fable [The Story of the Blue Planet](#). Since its Icelandic debut in 1999, *Blue Planet* has been published or performed in 40 countries. It was also the first children's book to receive the Icelandic Literary Prize (Magnason, n.d). I teach *Blue Planet* in my children's literature course to facilitate discussions about climate change and our responsibility to the planet. I believe Magnason's novel helps students appreciate the choice we are currently facing and outlines what needs to be done.

Magnason's *Blue Planet* is the home of eternally youthful wild children who live carefree lives on their idyllic island. With no adults around to tell them anything, the children are free to do as they please. One day, however, Gleesome Goodday crash lands his rocket onto the island,

bringing with him all the trappings of civilization. Goodday manipulates the children into selling him a fraction of their youth in exchange for the ability to fly. But best friends Brimir and Hulda soon discover that the price of their fun may be far more than they are willing to pay—perhaps the death of the planet itself. Ultimately, the wild children must choose to give up their newfound powers in order to save their world. What I find personally interesting about the narrative arc of this text is the emphasis on the children’s awakening to their negative impact on their environment (i.e. [ecological overshoot](#)) and what they need to do next (i.e. [system change](#)). This growth in the characters’ climate awareness illustrates a move from the increasingly dystopian [utopia](#) toward [ecotopia](#).

The beginning of the story shows the wild children living in relative harmony with the natural world but fully unconscious of their impact on it. The children live in bliss, but it is a bliss of ecological and [climate ignorance](#) resulting from their [human-supremacist](#) worldview: “The wild children ate when they were hungry, slept when they got tired, and in between they played without anyone interfering” (Magnason, 2012, p. 10). Indeed, the world exists only for their pleasure. When Brimir is first introduced, he is contemplating stealing penguin eggs for supper. Shortly after that, Hulda arrives with a dead seal and offers to share a meal with him. “It was no big deal,” she says, “I knocked it out with a club” (p. 14). They proceed to skin, grill, and eat the seal. This cultural marker points to the northern origins of the text, where seal is a common staple, especially among Indigenous tribes. However, including this episode at the beginning also serves to illustrate the characters’ ignorance about their [ecological footprint](#). Beauty is all around them, and they exclaim rapturously about it, but nothing requires the children to reflect on their surroundings or on their role in sustaining the planet.

With the arrival of Gleesome Goodday, a strangely garbed adult who represents [consumer culture](#), the ignorance of the wild children is exploited. Goodday is attired in a Hawaiian shirt and carries a briefcase—arguably symbols for two significant exploiters of the environment: tourism and corporate business. Proclaiming the children “horribly underdeveloped,” Goodday declares that he will show them “real fun” by making their wildest dreams come true (p. 27). One such dream is the ability to fly. Having arrived in a rocket ship, Goodday is equipped with all manner of tools and gadgets, such as the “AP XU 456r 2000 Super Vacuum Cleaner” (p. 30), which he uses to vacuum up the butterfly powder that enables the children to fly. At first, the children express their concern for the butterflies. But once they are assured that the butterflies have not been harmed—other than having their ability to fly stolen—the children reason: “There are no laws on this island so it must be okay to vacuum-clean butterflies” (p. 30). Previous to Goodday’s arrival, watching the annual flight of the butterflies was the wild children’s greatest joy (p. 27). Now they are willing to trade that joy for the ability to fly themselves: a thought-provoking illustration of [human expansionism](#). Significantly, they emphasize their own lawless state to defend the theft of the butterfly powder.

But the “fun” doesn’t stop there. Although Goodday seems to give the children only what *they* desire, the wild children enthusiastically embrace *anything* he offers, sadly at the expense of other children and beings on the Blue Planet. When the children discover that the butterfly powder

only allows them to fly in sunlight, the children complain to Goodday that they are bored at night. So Goodday nails the sun to the sky to keep it shining all the time (p. 39). When clouds obscure the sun, the children ask Goodday to fix the weather once again. This time, Goodday creates a giant wolf from the smoke of his cigar to chase the clouds from the sky (p. 43). None of the children give a thought to what may be happening on the other side of their world due to the imbalance they have created by hoarding natural resources for themselves.

Before they can become [climate literate](#), Brimir and Hulda must recognize the damage their fun has generated: the [dystopia](#) created from the wild children's greed. When Brimir and Hulda are blown off course to the other side of the Blue Planet during a flying race, they discover a land in darkness. Here, cut off from the sun, children and animals are starving and plants are dying. Significantly, Brimir and Hulda discover that they no longer smell like real children due to the "Teflon wonder stuff" (p. 48) that Goodday coated them with. A bear refuses to eat them, believing they are either "plastic children or zombies" (p. 61). Because Brimir and Hulda smell faintly of butterfly powder, the wild animals call them the "butterfly monsters" (p. 69). Brimir and Hulda take advantage of that fear to demand that the animals serve them food. Their fun is cut short when the animals deliver to them a weak and pale child. Befriending the boy Darrow, they follow him back to his camp where they are introduced to other ghost children (p. 78). Not actual ghosts, the ghost children are in a desperate condition due to the [slow violence](#) of being deprived of sunlight on their side of the planet. They relay their plight to Brimir and Hulda and proclaim what I argue is the core message of the text: "If the forest dies, we die too" (p. 81). Embarrassed at their role in creating the dark side of the planet (i.e. [environmental degradation](#)), Brimir and Hulda mislead the ghost children into believing that their side of the world is suffering as well. The sympathetic ghost children gift Brimir and Hulda with precious food and supplies and most especially with a balloon that will get them home. Brimir and Hulda return from their journey with the knowledge that a choice must be made and the daunting task of convincing the wild children to make it.

Key to the resolution of the narrative is [collective climate action](#) and democratic process. Brimir and Hulda's revelations meet with resistance from both Goodday and the wild children. The wild children prevaricate, saying "Somebody must do something sometime" (p. 95). They also put their decision to democratic vote, which is heavily influenced by Goodday's [greenwashing](#). He argues that they can have their fun and save the ghost children, too: "If we all pull together and send the children in the darkness food and blankets and shoes, then we'll save their lives and we can still keep the nail in the sun" (p. 103). But Brimir and Hulda know that the imbalance of resources will not alleviate the suffering of the ghost children. In due course, it is the generosity of the ghost children themselves that finally turns the tide, when they send crates of supplies across the sea. Goodday initially plays off the fears of the wild children and tries to convince them the crates are full of bombs. Instead, the crates are full of food, clothing, and stories. Ultimately, the wild children agree to what is the book's version of [degrowth](#) and respect for [ecosystems balance](#): they return the butterfly powder to the butterflies and to unpin the sun.

What is refreshingly absent from this text is active violence in resolving the problems of the Blue Planet. The wild children make conscious choices to change their world by changing themselves

and the way they interact with their environment (i.e. system change). Goodday is not killed, banished, or punished, but instead given a more limited role. This may suggest that [regenerative economy](#) and consumer culture built on respecting planetary limits may be possible. Hulda provides the breakthrough when she asks Goodday what he dreams of. When it turns out that he wants “to be a king” (p. 121), Hulda and other children grant Goodday’s wish, observing that a king in a castle is “like a monkey in a cage” (p. 124). By granting Goodday his wish, the wild children will be able to keep an eye on him. The events that follow demonstrate that the wild children have learned from Goodday, although perhaps not in the way he imagined. In exchange for his castle and title, Goodday is persuaded to return the children’s lost youth and to unpin the sun. In the end, he even learns to appreciate fairy tales, starry skies, and the flight of the butterflies.

The impact of the [human enterprise](#) on the environment cannot be denied, as the fate of Ok illustrates. We can no longer pretend that what happens in one corner of the world has no effect on another. Magnason maintains, “The melting of the glaciers is an issue all future generations will have to deal with and adapt to. As the glaciers are not vanishing and becoming nothing, they are becoming a rising ocean that will come splashing at the city gates of the world” (2019). Magnason’s novel provides a hopeful, [planetarianist](#) narrative about people learning, coming together, and making informed choices for humanity and for the planet. The same choice is placed before us, just as it was for the children of the Blue Planet: Can we undo what we have done? Can we unpin the sun? And what ecotopian future are we brave enough to dream into being?

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