

George Carlin on Saving the Planet

In addition to making us laugh, comedians serve a useful social purpose. They often say things we feel we aren't able to. In our professional (and social) lives, we frequently avoid topics that are politically sensitive or emotionally charged, since few of us enjoy confrontation. But difficult topics often benefit from a fresh, fearless perspective.

In this 7-minute clip, the late great Carlin is unkind to environmentalists, but his larger point is impressively well-informed. When he discusses the various forces with which planet Earth has contended over its 4.5-billion lifespan he isn't making any of this up. It's all true.

"The planet has been through a lot worse than us; been through all kinds of things worse than us. Been through earthquakes, volcanoes, plate tectonics, continental drift, solar flares, sun spots, magnetic storms, the magnetic reversal of the poles, hundreds of thousands of years of bombardment by comets and asteroids and meteors, worldwide floods, tidal waves, worldwide fires, erosion, cosmic rays, recurring ice ages - and we think some plastic bags and some aluminum cans are going to make a difference?"

We humans have a nasty habit of believing that everything is about us. Not only are we the reason everything bad happens, but we actually imagine we're in a position to influence natural forces that were set into motion long before we arrived. One day the entire theory of human-caused global warming may be viewed as a textbook case of this navel-gazing, human-centric approach to the universe.

Carlin is right. As a species, we're capable of supreme arrogance. That we're obsessing about saving the planet when so much of humanity still lacks clean drinking water and enough food may qualify as "the greatest arrogance of all."