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[00:00:00] **Sunil Amrith:** The International Organization of Migration estimate is that more than a billion people are going to be displaced from their homes between now and 2050, so just the next 25 years. When we think about climate related displacement, I think there's a certain assumption that global heating is gonna cause millions and millions of people to be at the gates of US Europe.

[00:00:20] Actually, the IPCC estimates that 90% are going to be displaced domestically within their own countries. Most of them are going to be destined for the mega cities of the global south, which are already under strain in terms of their infrastructure and their capacity. The question for us now is what happens when that return becomes more and more difficult because of the ecological conditions of home become permanently altered and perhaps uninhabitable.

[00:00:51] **Nate Hagens:** Today I'm pleased to be joined by Sunil Amrith, a professor of history at Yale University, as well as a professor at Yale School of the Environment, where we discuss a topic I've been keenly interested in exploring on the show, which is human migration. Sunil earned his doctorate at the University of Cambridge and is published widely in the fields of environmental history, the history of human migration, and the history of public health.

[00:01:18] His research focuses on the movement of humans and the ecological processes that have connected south and Southeast Asia and has expanded to encompass global environmental history. In addition to teaching, Sunil is the current director of the Whitney and Beney McMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale.

[00:01:39] His new book, the Burning Earth, is an environmental history of the modern world that foregrounds the experience of the global south. In this episode, Sunil offers historical. Cultural and environmental perspectives on the complex history and reasons behind human migration, what it means to be a migrant, the emotional dimensions of migration, and how conflict shapes, migration patterns.

[00:02:05] He also shares his views on future migration, speculation and trends, policy recommendations, the importance of water and economic conditions, and the role of education in preparing societies for the challenges ahead. If you are enjoying this podcast, I invite you to subscribe to our substack newsletter where you can read more about the system science underpinning the human predicament, where my team and I post essays and other special announcements related to The Great Simplification.

[00:02:35] You can find the link to subscribe in the show description. With that, please welcome Professor Sunil Amrith. Sunil, great to see you. Welcome to the show. Thanks for having me, Nate. Are you at your office at Yale right now? I'm at home actually. So I have invited you, today to discuss a topic that I have not covered before, which is humanity's history of migration, especially in regards to environmental crises and what that history might infer or teach us about current and upcoming climate migration, as most of the things that we cover on The Great Simplification.

[00:03:16] This is a very complex and broad topic, but I wanna begin by narrowing in on a very interesting region that you dedicated an entire book to, which is the Bay of Bengal in Southeast Asia. Can you start by explaining why this area is such a unique place to study migration and cultural dynamics and what drew you to it, in your studies?

[00:03:40] **Sunil Amrith:** I understand, Nate, that you've just been on the shores of the Bay of Bengal, or not far? Yeah, last year. I think the Bay of Bengal is a unique place to study migration and cultural dynamics because it's such a layered history. people have been moving around that part of the world for centuries and, because of the monsoon winds, trade and commerce and movement.

[00:04:08] Has a much longer history there than it does in many other of the great water bodies of the world. And so in some sense it's an interesting microcosm of different eras of migration. So, you know, we have modern mass migration under the British Empire and what has come after that. But we also have these much older currents where traders, pilgrims students have been moving around.

[00:04:31] And even to this day, if you walk around any of the port cities in the Bay of Bengal, whether on the Indian side or on the Southeast Asian side, you see with every street, every step, that long and deep history of cultures and interaction meeting each other, colliding. This is not just a peaceful history, it's also a history of conflict, but it's certainly a history of, intersection and layering.

[00:04:58] And so that's why I found it such an interesting place to think about migration. And I think the biggest insight that comes from starting with the bare bank goal is to. Really the insight that migration is a normal part of human existence. The way our politics and our institutions have evolved over the last a hundred years or so.

[00:05:15] We perhaps think of migration as more like the exception. We assume that most people are locals and then there are migrants. I think if you start in the Bay of Bengal, turns that on its head a little bit. Everyone was mobile for many periods in that region's history. And I think that's why starting there has led me, It's down the path that I've taken in my own perspective on migration and its long history.

[00:05:41] **Nate Hagens:** Well, to use a really wide boundary perspective, unless we're living in the Rift Valley, in the Old Divide Gorge, we're all migrants, to some degree or our ancestors were. So how far back did you study, migration around the Bay of Bengal?

[00:05:57] **Sunil Amrith:** My own work focuses on the last 200 years, but it has a long sort of prelude. And so I have been interested in the kinds of migration that you saw around the Bay of Bengal a thousand years ago. For example, there are amazing archeological sites in present day Malaysia on the coast of Malaysia, the state of qar, which shows that in 700, 800 AD you already have Hindu temples, quite elaborate structures.

[00:06:23] And of course there are holes in our knowledge. We have to piece this together as archeologists have been doing. But, It's clear evidence that there's already this vibrant commerce across that part of the world. and there are so many other kinds of evidence, including in folklore and legend and mythology that tell us how connected those two coasts of the Bare Bengal have been for, many centuries.

[00:06:48] **Nate Hagens:** So historically, on average, does your research suggest a order of magnitude? How many humans would've been considered migrants, and how has this number changed throughout the past few centuries?

[00:07:00] **Sunil Amrith:** One of the things that I think is surprising to a lot of people is maybe counterintuitive, given how we think about migration, is that the proportion of the global population that is made up of international migrants.

[00:07:16] So let's start with those who are crossing political borders. But the proportion of the global population made up of international migrants has hardly changed in the last 20 or 30 years. the number of migrants has gone up with

global population, but we're talking about between three and a half and 4% as global population can be seen to be.

[00:07:34] International or cross border or long distance

[00:07:37] **Nate Hagens:** migrants. When you say the word migrant, is that someone who in their lifetime, has moved, from one country to the next, or is it someone who's in the moving process now? Like this, year or last year?

[00:07:49] **Sunil Amrith:** I'm talking about someone who in their lifetime has moved countries.

[00:07:53] Okay, and we'll come to, I think the much more complicated question of how we measure people who are moving within their own countries. There, I think it's a slightly different picture, but if we're to take those who've crossed a border, then in fact that proportion hasn't changed in 20, 30, 40 years. But what's interesting is it was much higher in the 19th century.

[00:08:12] If you look at the peak of migration in the 1870s, then something like eight or 9% of the global population could be considered to have been a migrant.

[00:08:20] **Nate Hagens:** So the number of migrants today is higher in absolute terms, but as a percentage of the population, it's lower than it was 150 years ago. Exactly right.

[00:08:30] **Sunil Amrith:** And that I think is counterintuitive to a lot of people. I think we, maybe the way we talk about migration, a lot of people assume that migration is an all time high that we've never seen. Yeah. This level of migration that may be true in absolute terms, but not as a proportion of the human population.

[00:08:47] **Nate Hagens:** So, so you and I live in the United States. and I could be wrong because this is not, an issue that I'm very fluent in. not because I don't think it's important or I'm not interested in it, is just, I have a 1300 cc brain and 12 hours a day. and I just can't focus on everything but. The word migrant today in the us.

[00:09:11] When you hear that word, it immediately has a little bit of a pejorative, negative connotation. Is that true? Is that only in the United States? Is that a new phenomenon recently, or do you have any thoughts on that? I think it's cyclical.

[00:09:27] **Sunil Amrith:** I don't think it's exclusive to the United States. I think in fact, we're seeing a version of this in just about every society that I know.

[00:09:34] Well, it's true, even in Asian societies, there has been a increasing hostility towards those labeled migrants. Yeah, I don't think that is universally true. I think there are moments in history where that is true. I think one could go back a hundred years to early 20th century in America. Again, I think the term migrant would've been loaded with various kinds of assumptions.

[00:09:54] And then I think there have been periods where that has been less true, where there's been perhaps a more positive narrative around migration and migrants. it does seem cyclical at the moment. I think it's also global, which is to say, I. Anti-migrant sentiment itself is something that has become globalized, which is to say that certain ways of talking about migrants, certain ways about thinking of, migration, through social media, through other forms of media spreads from d from one society to another.

[00:10:26] And so you hear these strange echoes of how migrants are discussed in one society, often in places you wouldn't expect. And so I think, I don't think it's exclusive to the US and neither do I think that it's a single singular shift. I think.

One can go back and see moments where, migration has been more or less positively considered.

[00:10:46] **Nate Hagens:** So what kinds of pressures or situations do people face that eventually force them and their family to leave their life behind and move to a new place? And how, whatever your answer is to that question, is that different in the last decade than it was in prior centuries

[00:11:04] **Sunil Amrith:** when I started studying migration?

[00:11:06] I think. I was struck by a paradox, which is that if we take a really big picture view, then migration is a form of human behavior, of collective human behavior, which does actually follow similar patterns across time and place. We can, there aren't rules, but there are certainly patterns, whether we're thinking about transatlantic migration in 19th century or migration in more recent times in other parts of the world, and yet the minute you dive deeper, the minute you are thinking about the experiences of individual migrants or small groups of migrants, then in fact.

[00:11:40] What strikes me is the multiplicity of reasons why people move. As soon as you are dealing with that level of the individual or the family, then people's stories of migration or what led them to move are as varied as people are. Varied, and it certainly struck me that it's putting those two layers together that I found very both fascinating and challenging as a historian of migration, that if you, step back, if you're thinking about migration as a large scale pattern of movement, then there are certain similarities that you can see across so many different strands of migration.

[00:12:16] But as soon as you take a much more sort of human centered perspective or a micro perspective. I think those tend to fall apart a little bit. I was struck, I did a lot of oral histories when I was studying migration, of people from

South India who moved to Malaysia, and I did these interviews about 15, 20 years ago.

[00:12:35] But at that point, these men, most of them were men were already in their eighties, some of them in their nineties. So they'd moved in the early 20th century. Most of them had moved to work on rubber plantations. And what struck me was that not a single one of their stories was the same. It was chance events, familiar issues like debt impoverishment, but also completely idiosyncratic reasons.

[00:13:02] A house fire that this young man was blamed for, led him to follow his neighbor. To the port and to get on a ship to Malaya. Some of these, reasons are just so individual and so specific. I think another thing that leads people to move to some places and not others is family connections. And this is one of those patterns that I think you can see across time and space.

[00:13:28] People go where others from their own place or from their own family have gone before. There's really interesting research on 19th century migration from China, for example, that shows that in one village. One third of the men from that village may have been overseas at any given time, and then a village half an hour down the road would have no migrants at all.

[00:13:50] Because the networks are so specific, and I think you can see that in other places too.

[00:13:56] **Nate Hagens:** So let me ask you this, and I have some follow ups to what you just said, but I'm curious, did you, in your historical study, could you group the reasons of historical migration into some broad categories like war, economic hardship, leaving to be with a family member or an environmental reason?

[00:14:18] Are there broad categories like that, or is that too difficult to assess?

[00:14:22] **Sunil Amrith:** There are definitely broad categories. I think what strikes me is that it's usually more than one. Yeah. So any large scale movement of people, and I'm not talking about temporary displacement from one's home for a. A few weeks or a few months even.

[00:14:37] But if you're talking about large scale movement to people from one place to another, it tends to be a mixture of these categories. I think all of the categories that you identified hold true economic hardship, environmental pressures, family networks, coercion. Let's not forget how many migrants in the past and even in the present, have had very little choice about their movement.

[00:15:03] they've been oriented and pushed by others, without a lot of say in the matter. today we talk about that as human trafficking, but the past, of course, we're talking about movement of enslaved people, but indenture labor, there are so many forms of unfree movement and war and conflict is a huge one.

[00:15:22] and of course, sadly remains a major cause of migration. But what's really, I think. Striking to me over a long historical period is that it's usually more than one of those things at once. And maybe we'll come to this when we talk about what we mean by climate migration.

[00:15:38] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah, I definitely have thoughts on that.

[00:15:41] just having spent six weeks in the southern tip of India, that is going to bear the brunt of, the global heating and the pipeline. and I have a lot of concerns and empathy and ideas there. But sticking on this, so much of the news coverage and wider discussion on migration that we hear about, focus on the analytics, the numbers, and also some of the tragedies.

[00:16:07] but can you describe some of the human experiences and emotions that are involved in such a life-altering event for those that are forced to migrate?

[00:16:17] **Sunil Amrith:** So the, British Somali poet, Warsan Shire has this one line, which has always stayed with me since I read it. And that's nobody leaves their home unless home is the mouth of a shark.

[00:16:29] and it is that idea that I think those of us with privilege in the world, and this is not a small number of people, might think of migration also as something we simply choose to do, to broaden our horizons, to try something new, to have a change. And of course, that's always been the case. That's called travel.

[00:16:49] That's called travel. That's called travel or, you know, voluntary migration. But if we're talking about those who don't have a lot of choice, it's an uprooting, it's an upheaval, it's a tearing from, not just a sense of place, but.

[00:17:06] The most interesting observers of this in the 19th century was actually the, Russian novelist and short story writer Anton Chakko. And, in my book, the Burning Earth, actually start my chapter in the 19th century by quoting from Chakko, not from his fiction, but from his non-fiction. He wrote a, travel log of his journey to Cullin Island, which at that point was a labor camp, forced labor camp for Russian prisoners.

[00:17:28] And, I just quote one line from Chekhov when he is talking about what it's to have to move. And he says, to cut loose from a life which seems to be going unusually badly, and to sacrifice for this one's own locality. One's own beloved domestic nest can only be done by an exceptional human being, a hero.

[00:17:53] And that really struck me. You know, we don't think of migrants as heroes. In fact, if anything the prevailing set of assumptions and stereotypes around migration is something far more, far darker and far more negative. And,

but if we think about what it takes to uproot yourself from home and from community and what level of pressure there must be, to force large numbers of people to do that, I think we start to see that stories matter.

[00:18:22] Of course, we need to know the numbers and we need those large scale analytics, and that helps policy makers, that helps understanding. But I think that we sometimes miss something if we're only thinking about migration in terms of numbers and statistics. And I think that more humanistic perspective, storytelling perspective is very important.

[00:18:41] **Nate Hagens:** Have you in your research, like interviewed migrants to find their stories

[00:18:45] **Sunil Amrith:** very often and I think that's what's really left me with a sense of. The human experience at the heart of migration, which is something that, you know, anthropologists have been very good at studying. Sometimes we lose that perspective.

[00:19:00] I think, as you say, in the, in some of the media commentary around migration.

[00:19:04] **Nate Hagens:** And just outta curiosity, the people that you interview, do they consider themselves migrants or do they just, it's obvious this is the path that I had to do, I had no choice or, such.

[00:19:14] **Sunil Amrith:** What's very interesting is that of course a lot of the people, I interviewed were looking back on their lives and they were looking back on migrations that they had undertaken much earlier in their lives.

[00:19:25] And then very often they had then stayed, in this case in Malaysia, which is where they traveled to from India. And I think over time of course, we tell

stories to ourselves about our own lives that, maybe are a smoother arc than they felt like at the time. And so by the time I was talking to people, they talked about having little choice in their journeys, but for the most part, what they told was a fairly, Positive or even redemptive story about how we suffered and we've made a new life for ourselves. And in some ways that's the universal narrative. We, think of that as a very distinctively American immigrant story. But actually I heard versions of that in Southeast Asia. I heard versions of that in India.

[00:20:06] The idea that things were very hard. I didn't have a lot of choice in where I ended up, but I've made the best of it. And, so there is always that. To the story, which may be a retrospective thing. like I said, I was often interviewing elderly people who were looking back. and I think maybe, the work that anthropologists do to interview people who are in the middle of migration or who have migrated very recently, those might be quite different narratives.

[00:20:32] **Nate Hagens:** So before we get, to global heating and its, likely impact on mass migration, did, can you summarize the, I mean, it wasn't the focus, you said you focused on migration of the last few centuries, but what about, since the beginning of the Anthropocene, the last 10 to 12,000 years, can you summarize what happened then?

[00:20:57] or is it just too complex to even attempt?

[00:21:00] **Sunil Amrith:** I mean, I think one can take, if you take that. Time range. Then you can see that migration has shaped the modern world. I mean, everything about the world that we inhabit, including, you know, where there are concentrations of population, that is an Anthropocene story.

[00:21:18] I mean, in many ways where agriculture takes roots helps us to explain what are still today the most densely populated and in some cases the wealthiest societies in the world. I started my recent book, the Burning Earth, about a

thousand years ago. not to say that was the beginning of the story, but to see in a sense that a thousand years ago, a lot of those much longer range changes that you're talking about, the sort of 10,000 year range had solidified.

[00:21:48] And that is the moment where you start to get, in my case, I chose to begin with a fast expansion in cultivation of rice in China about a thousand years ago, which allows for a large increase in human population and allows more and more people to live together.

[00:22:02] **Nate Hagens:** Of course, a thousand or 10,000 years ago, we had vastly smaller populations, and we're gonna get to climate in a second, but very few people know that since the end of the last glaciation, like the last 20,000 years, sea level has risen over 400 feet, so like 135 meters.

[00:22:23] So there had to be some migration of communities that were, that are now underwater, and that's gonna continue. any comment on that? I think water

[00:22:34] **Sunil Amrith:** is at the heart of the story, and I think we'll probably come back to this in our conversation, Nate, but it helps us to understand so much of the patents, human existence.

[00:22:43] I mean, now. Utter dependence on water. not in a deterministic way, but in a way that has shaped people's choices, decisions spurred their ingenuity. I think we can see a real link between where the water is and where the people go.

[00:22:59] **Nate Hagens:** So, I'll just ask you, Sunil, how do you anticipate or speculate the trends in migration changing in the coming decades, say from here to 2050 or even beyond, based on the increasing, pressures from global heating, including where migrants are moving from and the countries they're moving to?

[00:23:22] Big question. I think there's no question there's gonna

[00:23:25] **Sunil Amrith:** be a colossal. And the International Organization of migration is just one estimate amongst many. But the ioms, estimate is that more than a billion people are going to be displaced from their homes between now and 2050. So just the next 25 years.

[00:23:41] **Nate Hagens:** So just that stat alone, implies a much larger percentage of the human population than you've been studying recently,

[00:23:50] **Sunil Amrith:** except I think there's, that's where we come to, you know, who we count as migrants because the vast majority of those people are not gonna cross the border. They're going to move within their own countries.

[00:24:02] They're gonna go from Texas to Minnesota. They're gonna move within their own countries and. If we include, I think it's much, we don't have the data in the same way, but if we include internal migrants, then I think we have actually witnessed an unprecedented level of migration over the last 30 or 40 years.

[00:24:20] Driven primarily by the massive urbanization of China, first and foremost. But many other societies in the global south, And I think when we think about climate related displacement, we need to remember we in the global north, I think there's a certain assumption that, global heating is gonna cause millions and millions of people to be at the gates of.

[00:24:42] Global North US Europe, actually 90% of them, the IPCC estimates that 90% of those displaced by global heating are going to be displaced domestically in terms in within their own countries. Most of them are going to be destined for the mega cities of the global south, which are already under strain in terms of their infrastructure and their capacity to incorporate

[00:25:05] **Nate Hagens:** more and more people.

[00:25:06] It boggles the mind. I was, asked to do a lecture series in, Tamil Nadu, province in the south of India. And near the end I had to give recommendations, which is a hard thing to do, being a system scientist with an environmental focus, knowing at least the midpoint of the distribution of the warming in the pipeline and.

[00:25:33] I told the people in the south of India who were very, attentive, concerned listeners that they're gonna be, both ends of the migration spectrum would be there, there would be people leaving even further south, or Sri Lanka or other places coming there, but there would be people in order to find cooler nighttime and everything else, temperatures moving further north in India.

[00:26:00] I don't see any clear cut solution there. it's one of those, it's a predicament, not a problem. you know, a problem has a discreet solution. so, so I'm gonna, I'm gonna get to that. But historically, speaking about global heating and what we can infer, how often have environmental pressures, like climate or something else been the driving force of human migration, and what can we learn from those historical situations?

[00:26:32] **Sunil Amrith:** I think. Environmental pressures to, to think of that broadly have always been a major cause of people moving. Like for example, what? Floods and drought above all. Okay. But what's interesting is that people's migration in response to often water related pressures have often been short term. And that remains true when it comes to large scale flooding in the world today, that people will have to leave their homes after an episode of catastrophic flooding.

[00:27:06] But the intention is, to return. The question for us now is what happens when that return becomes more and more difficult because of the ecological conditions of home become permanently altered and perhaps uninhabitable? that

is something which I think is very much a dilemma that we're going to face because, environmental pressures have always led people to move.

[00:27:30] but often they return. Or at least some of them return.

[00:27:35] **Nate Hagens:** So I just had an insight that I hadn't thought about before. When I think about future, kind of baked in migration due to climate, I think about the areas of the world that will largely become uninhabitable without air conditioning due to higher wet bulb temperatures.

[00:27:53] But I didn't consider, like I live on the border of Minnesota and Wisconsin, and last week in Milwaukee, they had 12 inches of rain in a day because. Well, I mean, we could spend time listing why that is the warmer, air holds more water, et cetera. So the standard deviation of rainfall is going to increase.

[00:28:16] So Wisconsin and Minnesota are not going to have major wet bulb issues per se. But there may be isolated events, like you say, like floods or droughts that were unexpected and maybe not even in the models that will force people to move. I think that's exactly right. And

[00:28:38] **Sunil Amrith:** I suppose, you know, your example of Wisconsin and Minnesota is import because we shouldn't assume that this climate related migration is only gonna happen out there, so to speak.

[00:28:52] And I'm, speaking to you from within the us When I say out there, I mean in the rest of the world and that. Less wealthy part of the world. It's happening here too. It's happening everywhere. Oh yeah. And I think this is something that may help us shift the way we have this conversation so that climate related mobility, displacement, migration, whatever you want to call it, may be part of the human condition rather than something that, you know, we

[00:29:17] **Nate Hagens:** don't need to worry about.

[00:29:18] So, so what are some factors or causes of migration that people who have never been in these situations or thought about this might, might consider?

[00:29:29] **Sunil Amrith:** I suppose one way of posing that is as a question, which is that to any listeners who maybe haven't really thought about this, if your home suddenly became uninhabitable either because of a sudden disaster or because of a long-term change, where would you go?

[00:29:49] And I think the question, where would you go? Maybe gets to the heart of this? Because not everyone can go everywhere. I think some of these factors we have to think about is, do you live close to a border? Is that border a border you can cross? Or are you gonna take a great risk by trying to cross that border?

[00:30:08] Do you have the right to cross that border? Do you have the ability to cross that border? I think the other question is migration is an expensive business. If we think about those, particularly those who take longer distance migrations, it's usually not the poorest members of society. it tends to be those with a little bit of resource behind them with the networks to be able to do this.

[00:30:31] If you think about the kind of migration that takes place, for example, labor migration in many parts of the global south, labor recruiters and brokers take a big chunk of money in order to make those mo movements possible. And so. I would then ask the question, well, who can't move? Because I think that is as important as who is going to

[00:30:52] **Nate Hagens:** move.

[00:30:53] So I'm glad you say that because again, I'm no expert on this, but in my naive, framing, I assume that the people that are migrating right now are the

poorest factions of society. And what you just said makes total sense. That's not true.

[00:31:10] **Sunil Amrith:** It would very often be people who are relatively speaking poor and who do not have a lot of resource or a lot of options to insulate themselves by staying at home.

[00:31:20] But it's rarely the very poorest. I mean, if you look at data from India, the very poorest members of society do migrate, but they migrate very locally and it tends to be seasonal. It tends to be, specific. And those who are taking long, and I'm just talking about within India at this point, those who are taking longer distance journeys tend to have a little bit more resource.

[00:31:41] Those who are crossing international borders as. Even more than that because it's more expensive.

[00:31:46] **Nate Hagens:** Let me ask you this, Sunil, and you may not know the answer. When I was in India, you know, I met hundreds of people and there were the intellectuals who were very aware of the human predicament and all the things.

[00:31:59] But I was surprised how little climate change was even discussed as a phenomenon. in your interaction with governments and other academics and, people in the field, in Southeast Asia, are they aware of what's coming down the pike? are, is there a, panic and a like, what are we gonna do? Or is it a giant cognitive dissonance that they're just telling a rosy side of the story?

[00:32:32] Because even at two degrees Celsius, it let alone two and a half or three, it changes a lot.

[00:32:42] **Sunil Amrith:** In my experience, what you don't see in India or Southeast Asia on any point of the political spectrum is what we might call climate change denial. Ah, in a kind of American sense. But there may be a different kind of denial, which you, I think rightly describe as dissonance, which is to say, no, no government official, no policy maker is unaware of what is happening.

[00:33:08] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:33:10] **Sunil Amrith:** But I think that the compression of historical change in many parts of south and southeast Asia has been so great, which is to say that so much has changed in such a short period of time that in many ways climate change is seen as one challenge amongst many and perhaps not the most proximate.

[00:33:32] Threat or challenge. And so one could see that as dissonance. What you don't have is a kind of hand wringing despair. I think there's rather a sort of brute pragmatism and perhaps underlying that pragmatism is a kind of denial about the scale of what is coming, but a sense that these are problems like many other problems.

[00:33:50] And, development writ large is going to solve a lot of them.

[00:33:56] **Nate Hagens:** Well, that, rhymes with some of the other issues that we talk about on this podcast. it's not complete naivete, it's just, an optimistic take on the better side of the distribution of what might happen. So we'll get back to that topic.

[00:34:13] 'cause I want to hear, your prescriptions if there are such, but you mentioned water earlier and I know you wrote an entire book on the relationship between water and human societies from a historical perspective, which also

touched, on the role of violent conflict, inequality and migration. So can you maybe, explain how water has shaped and driven human migration and what can that teach us about a future where due to some of the things I mentioned earlier, a stable hydrological system, may be a thing of the past.

[00:34:48] **Sunil Amrith:** I think depends, in a sense how much you want to zoom out. But certainly if you think about the history of civilization itself, if we want to use that term, but certainly the city of, the history of all the great cities in the world, very few of them are far from a water source. In fact, the ones that are, anomalous and interesting exceptions are.

[00:35:06] Think of the city of Bangalore and South India. Think about, it's, very unusual for a city of that size to be relatively distant from water source.

[00:35:15] **Nate Hagens:** Well, hold on just a second. I mean, most of human history, we, a lot of, our ancestors lived on the coast, so they were near a water source, but it was saltwater.

[00:35:25] But I presumably you mean freshwater?

[00:35:27] **Sunil Amrith:** I mean freshwater and riverine systems, which is where it's on the river. Deltas that most of these cities have tended to develop a often a little bit inland from the coast, not necessarily directly on the coast, but that is where the large urban agglomerations.

[00:35:41] Broadly speaking have tended to cluster. And if you look at the map of the, largest cities in the world today, most of them are sort of coastal or near coastal. and so I think there's that level

[00:35:53] **Nate Hagens:** of patterning. Well, it, it makes no sense if you're a human to, plant a stake in the ground if there's no water around.

[00:36:00] **Sunil Amrith:** Exactly. And it, it's as simple as that in some ways. And I think we're, of course, what's new is whether we're talking about Las Vegas or we're talking about Dubai, we now have very large cities that are engineered into existence in places where hydrologically, they probably shouldn't be. yeah. And the late Mike Davis wrote very interestingly about LA about, Las Vegas in these terms, like how much engineering goes into making.

[00:36:30] It possible to have a city in this place.

[00:36:32] **Nate Hagens:** And then it becomes, not a water limitation per se, but also an energy, a financial, a systems, liability and risk. Exactly.

[00:36:43] **Sunil Amrith:** And I think that's what's really different, that we can take the long sweep of human history. And it's rare to find large human settlements away from water.

[00:36:50] But what's new now is I think that kind of both the ambition and the technological capacity to build large cities in very hard places. And then the question is, how sustainable is that? Where's the water coming from? You know, how deep is the hydrological footprint of these cities?

[00:37:06] **Nate Hagens:** So were there any monumental water related events in the last, millennia or so that are, specifically related to, big migration events?

[00:37:17] **Sunil Amrith:** Always, I think in conjunction with other factors. I mean, historical climatology has made a lot of very interesting progress and insight into what we call the medieval climate anomaly, the little ice Age. And there's a lot of work that's been done, particularly on the little ice age and how interconnected, wetter and colder winters were, driving the movement of people, but also the development of empires.

[00:37:41] And I think that's really crucial because I think the politics and the water come together. It's only when, hydrological changes. Often it's medium term hydrological changes. Intersect with new forms of political domination that you start to see the kinds of patterns that have shaped the world that we live in Now,

[00:37:59] **Nate Hagens:** one of my little, short pithy phrases, emanating from this work is not that humans are causing climate change, but that climate change caused humans.

[00:38:13] Because if you look pre Ag revolution, pre Anthropocene, the standard deviation of, climate variability and the weather and the water and the hydrological cycle was massive compared to the stability of the last 10,000 years. And so we were migrating all over the place, well, seasonally, which is why we couldn't stay in one place and farm and do agriculture and, build roots.

[00:38:40] **Sunil Amrith:** I like that. And I think that's, in, in that long historical view is I think a lot of insight for the world we may be moving into

[00:38:48] **Nate Hagens:** now. So let's get to violent conflict, even though I'd rather not. but it seems violent conflict seems closely linked with large scale human migration historically. can you unpack for us the relationship between these two issues and why we should consider this relationship when we discuss future migration related to global heating?

[00:39:12] **Sunil Amrith:** Violent conflict has probably been the cause of more large scale migration than any other single factor, and I would put it that way around. It is not usually the large scale migration that causes the violent conflict, but more the other way around it. It is that large scale migration tends to be the outcome of large scale conflict and mass violence, and that's been true for centuries.

[00:39:38] I think we need to think about this very seriously now because I do believe that one of the factors that we tend not to talk enough about when we're talking about the climate crisis is actually war. And the fact that there is a very close relationship between, and this is less about global heating, causing new kinds of conflict, though that may well be happening, that may well happen, but that in some sense, conflict is also driving the climate crisis.

[00:40:07] If we think about military emissions, if we think about the kinds of lasting ecological damage being done by, the conflicts that are all around us now, if we think about, the energy that is used by the industry, if we think about the. Knock on consequences of all those conflicts for the movement of people and the destabilization of ecologies, then I think that factor, we may assume it, we no longer need to think about that, but in fact, there is a long historical continuity that warfare.

[00:40:38] I think in an era of global heating, more than ever, we need to think about peace building. We need to think about disarmament. We need to think about the kinds of measures that we might take collectively as an international community and as individual societies try to reduce the colossal environmental and human harm that are still being caused by armed conflict.

[00:41:03] **Nate Hagens:** So in a world where there is no option for people to safely stay and thrive in their homelands, how would you, a world expert on the history of this, how would you define a successful migratory movement of people, both for people who are migrating and for those currently living in the land that they're migrating to?

[00:41:28] **Sunil Amrith:** There's been a lot of debate, particularly, when it comes to small island states in the Pacific. some of whose leaders have themselves said, there is no physical future for this community in place to imagine what it might

be for a whole country to migrate and to somehow retain its sense of identity, its sense of self without a physical place.

[00:41:52] Very moving, very powerful, very interesting questions. And there are policies that are being debated and there are, Relatively more sort of enlightened wealthy nations in the South Pacific, New Zealand in particular, that I think has been very much part of these conversations about what a successful, to use your phrase of successful migration trajectory might look like.

[00:42:17] and clearly some ingredients of that are, plenty of advanced planning. a narrative that doesn't present this as a catastrophe, particularly for the society, the host society, that people are moving to an investment, probably more than anything else, investment in the housing, the infrastructure, the educational resources that are needed to make that adjustment, possible.

[00:42:42] But that doesn't. It's straightforward, even if all of those things are in place. I mean, there are residents of small Pacific states who have no wish to be part of a planned migration who would rather hang on because that land means so much to them. Even with the knowledge of rising waters, even with the knowledge of catastrophe.

[00:43:03] See this in the US as well. You know, there are families that just don't want to evacuate even with all the warnings, even with all of the facilities that might have been provided for that to happen. So I think it's a really difficult question. I think we can abstract and generalize about what a successful migration might look like, but perhaps that's still doesn't get to the trauma.

[00:43:25] That still doesn't get to the difficulty.

[00:43:27] **Nate Hagens:** It's interesting because if you have a 10 year window, I have, I'll probably get in trouble for saying this. I have some really close friends

that live in New Orleans that are fluent in, these issues that conservationists, they care about the environment and.

[00:43:45] Birds and wildlife, but they live in New Orleans. And so in the next decade you do some sort of a game theory and New Orleans will probably be fine, who knows? but in the next 50 years, no. new Orleans can be uninhabitable probably, I think, or certainly in the next century, or certainly parts of it.

[00:44:07] So it, there's a ti there's a human 80 year expected lifespan sort of calculus on moving, and then there's a, oh my gosh, I'm in a crisis right now. We have no recourse. We have to move. that's just a random thought. Do you have any response to that?

[00:44:27] **Sunil Amrith:** I think that's a really interesting insight, Nate.

[00:44:30] The idea that there's the kind of human lifespan, timescale that we are all used to thinking in terms of, in relation to our own families, in relation to our own journeys, perhaps. And then there's the system theorists timescale, and then there's the government planners timescale. And these are all discrepant.

[00:44:52] They're not necessarily aligning. And so I think perhaps to go back to your initial question, what would a successful trajectory look like? we need to ask over what time horizon are we talking? Are we talking about planning for 10 years out from now with resources behind us, with political will on all sides?

[00:45:11] Then I think there's a more likely chance of a successful adaptation, a successful migration, than either putting it off, 50 years or having to wait until it's, in a sense it's too late and there are fewer options.

[00:45:26] **Nate Hagens:** Well, our culture, one of the, bylaws today is kick the can. so are there any countries or parts of countries that are taking that longer term view with respect to environmental migration?

[00:45:42] at all.

[00:45:43] **Sunil Amrith:** Actually highlight Bangladesh. And it's interesting because in the West, Bangladesh is often the first place cited as Bangladesh is going to be underwater. Bangladesh is the most climate vulnerable country. And I'm not denying those things are at some level true. But what's striking to me and what you don't hear so much about is the ingenuity and the thinking that is going into adapting to this and preparing for this in Bangladesh.

[00:46:11] I mean, let's start with one thing. the death toll from extreme weather in Bangladesh has a. Plummeted over the last 40 years, so cyclones of a magnitude that in the 1970s and into the 1980s were killing half a million people. In the last few years, cyclones just as strong as those have had a death toll in the tens or the hundreds.

[00:46:33] And this is all because of smart planning for evacuation. The construction of cyclone shelters, mobile phone warnings to families to evacuate. Bangladesh is starting to think about what it would mean to build migrant friendly, climate resilient cities. That's exactly the phrase that's being used by some policy makers in Bangladesh migrants from where?

[00:46:56] internal

[00:46:57] **Nate Hagens:** migrants. Now, would that mostly be south, moving north, or not necessarily that? Not necessarily. But that would certainly be the overall sort of trajectory. I'd never heard about that. What I have heard, in

Bangladesh, 'cause the land is so low near the ocean, that it's not the sea level rise or the warmer temperatures or the higher standard deviation of drought.

[00:47:18] Drought and flood per se. But that the soil acts as a wick and so that the salt water moves in 10 kilometers, 20 kilometers inland and causes salt in the ground. That then makes it more difficult to do agricultural production. And that may migration too.

[00:47:36] **Sunil Amrith:** That's a challenge. And in fact. Like, as likely as rising sea levels to cause people to have to move.

[00:47:46] **Nate Hagens:** So historically, what sort of factors did you discover? Sunil led to more peaceful and harmonious integrations of migrants into a new society or a new part of their country.

[00:47:58] **Sunil Amrith:** I think

[00:47:59] **Nate Hagens:** to generalize,

[00:48:00] **Sunil Amrith:** it has tended to be easier for migrants to be absorbed by a society or to put it from the migrant's point of view, for them to feel a sense of integration or belonging into a society where the barriers to entry have been relatively low.

[00:48:16] And the barriers, by that I mean the barriers to you becoming one of us. the barriers to, what it means to be part of a community. And often we see this before, for example, national identities perhaps very firm firmly or clearly defined, or when borders themselves are not. As rigid as they are in the world today.

[00:48:40] If we're thinking about more the more recent past, I think the more successful examples have come from societies which, you know, even if they do

have a clearly defined sense of national identity, these tend to be fairly. Open and inclusive, which is to say that you can become part of this community. and you know, there are of course different expectations in different societies about what that means

[00:49:01] **Nate Hagens:** and how much has, living through an era of economic growth and energy surplus and opportunity for everyone supported the landscape of what you just described.

[00:49:14] I think that's a

[00:49:15] **Sunil Amrith:** crucial part of the story. Clearly it is easier for, migrants to be incorporated within a society when jobs are plentiful and times are good, and infrastructure is robust, and housing is in good supply and services. Public services, medical facilities are not scarce so that people don't feel that newcomers are competing for them.

[00:49:40] **Nate Hagens:** I hadn't planned on asking this question, but, my board of advisors tells me to just follow my curiosity. so I'm sure you're aware of, kind of the media stories and headlines in Europe, with increasing Muslim populations in some European cities. So this isn't really a religious, people didn't move for religious reasons.

[00:50:05] they moved for environmental or, economic or other reasons as you described. But because they're shifting countries, the religious, belief backdrop is different from where they came. And do you have any thoughts on, all of that?

[00:50:21] **Sunil Amrith:** Again, I think they're very different. Examples that we can draw from different moments in history.

[00:50:29] I mean, to go back to where we began the conversation, Nate, one of the reasons I'm so fascinated by the Bay of Bengal world is that the kind of religious diversity, which in contemporary Europe, for example, is perceived as a problem, was in other cases not perceived as a problem at all. I mean, one of the most striking things about you go to the city of Malacca and Malaysia today, which was, one of the great trading port cities of the Straits of Malacca, then conquered by the Portuguese, you see literally next to each other, a cathedral, a mosque, a temple.

[00:51:02] You see that in Singapore, even to this day. and it's not that there were never any conflicts over religion or the use of public space, but by and large there was no sense of existential crisis. And perhaps one reason for that is because there were perhaps there was no clear majority community. These communities were so mixed that everyone, Could perhaps find space and what, when it becomes, I think perhaps more conflictual is where there's a clearly defined majority and a very identifiable minority. And that could be religious, it could be racial, it could be linguistic, it could be cultural. there are different axes in different societies in which that's, been found.

[00:51:42] That makes sense. That makes sense.

[00:51:47] **Nate Hagens:** I'm always struck by the, I, to be totally blunt, India has approaching a billion and a half people, rivaling China for the most populous nation on earth. I didn't know much about India, until I went there. I still don't know that much, but they never had like.

[00:52:11] Conquest, or anything. I mean, they were never, you know, militarily adventurous, and colonized, colonized other countries. And I mean, from, someone who's researched that area, what's up with that? And what was special about their culture? This is digressing a little bit from, our main topic, but your, comment about, diversity of perspectives and multiculturalism in a melting pot,

creates a little bit of its own stability because there's not one ingroup and outgroup.

[00:52:50] How do you describe how India retained that? you know, that Indic, spirit of. Nonviolence and inclusivity, if you will.

[00:53:02] **Sunil Amrith:** It depends in a sense whether you are taking as a unit, the India that now exists. Because I think what's striking is how politically fragmented and plural India has been for various periods of its history.

[00:53:17] There have been larger empires that have ruled that space going back to ancient times. But there have also been these long gaps where there has been no centralized in that sense. India is so different from China. In China, the striking thing is the continuity of centralized rule. And in India what is interesting is that you have these very long periods including, you know, between the Moogle Empire and the British of decentralization of multiple competing regional kingdoms.

[00:53:47] these were not peaceful. There was plenty of internal conflict and there is to this day a plenty of internal violence in Indian society. And there are, Regions of contemporary India that feel very marginalized and not at all included within, nation state as it currently exists. So if you take India as a whole, then yes, I think that's right.

[00:54:10] That India as it is now, has not been an expansionist power beyond its shores. Yeah. But there have been internal empires, many of them, including the British Empire, which came from elsewhere. And there has been plenty of internal conflict and violence, which I think, you know, many ways continues to this day in Kashmir, in the northeast of India.

[00:54:36] And so I think it depends the perspective you take. If you take India for granted, then yes, I think you could say that it has not been an expansionist society beyond it choice.

[00:54:45] **Nate Hagens:** Said differently, Nate, do a little bit more research. but it's a fascinating place. Thank you for, that clarification. Of course.

[00:54:52] When you just go to a place, everything is novel and new and you see, all, the good things that, that aren't in your culture. So, so moving back, to the core theme here, Sunil. What types of policies are needed, in your opinion from individual countries in order to ease the pressure of increasing migration in the future?

[00:55:15] Which, we can presume is kind of baked in and ensure quality lives for all people involved in these situations, whether it's Texas to Minnesota or southern India to Northern India, or Bangladesh to elsewhere. all the above. I think the two

[00:55:34] **Sunil Amrith:** key ingredients are acceptance and investment.

[00:55:38] So acceptance of migration is something not as anomalous or threatening, but as a part of the human condition and something which perhaps we're all gonna share more and more as the earth heats as, and massive public investment in infrastructure, in making lives possible for people as they move borders.

[00:55:59] And I think that is equally important for those who are moving and for those who in a sense are the host communities or those who already live in the places that people are moving to.

[00:56:07] **Nate Hagens:** So from a systems perspective, being aware of what's baked in, what sort of investments would make sense now before they're too late to do

[00:56:19] **Sunil Amrith:** housing, particularly with an aging population, perhaps we'll come to that.

[00:56:24] Medical care, medical facilities. I think the more planning that can be. To avoid a sense of migrants competing for those scarce resources with those who already lived there. 'cause that is at the heart of so much of the resentment and conflict.

[00:56:40] **Nate Hagens:** How do you minimize that? I just think that would be a natural ingroup, outgroup reaction.

[00:56:46] I think there is definitely

[00:56:48] **Sunil Amrith:** an, in a natural, maybe inevitable sense of us and them. That is where the acknowledgement piece perhaps comes in. I do think we need a different language, different narratives, and this is utopian and idealistic of me, but I do think we need, if we talk about migration in a different, way, that's never going to get rid of the hostility.

[00:57:12] But it might provide a different lens to think about it. How might that different way be articulated? One way is to suggest that we are all migrants. Yeah, true, As you put it earlier in our conversation, I think if, and that would take, that would be like a very big picture view, which is to say, yes, of course some of us feel very rooted in a place we feel attached to that place.

[00:57:39] We feel we've built our communities and our societies there, and when others come from elsewhere who perhaps don't speak the same language, it

perhaps look different from us. It does feel threatening and I do think that those of us and like myself who do see migration as first of all, a very natural form of human behavior and second of all, as having very often had positive effects.

[00:58:02] I do think we need to acknowledge that it may not just be prejudice or. Fear that leads people to be concerned when large scale migration takes place. I mean, I think, you know, to use, the political spectrum kind of language, I think, you know, liberals need to understand why, migration has been seen or is seen as threatening by many people.

[00:58:28] And I'm talking, you know, in American context in the United States. And I think, not to evade that, but to address that head on and to see whether there might be different ways of thinking about migration that allow us to both celebrate what makes us different and to understand that there is a shared predicament that sure face in this, on this planet right now.

[00:58:50] **Nate Hagens:** Let me ask you, kind of, somewhat off topic, but. I've raised this in some of my public presentations in the last five or 10 years, that in island communities that are remote, like some of the, the islands in Hawaii or New Zealand, or Australia, as people figure out the human predicament and the metris, there will be some people in these areas that migrate to the mainland because they wanna be closer to the source of supply chains and stability.

[00:59:30] But there will also be people that choose to go to migrate to these distant places that are removed from the chaos and military and population centers. So this is a different sort of migration than the forced. It's the, like, I have privilege and means, and I'm looking ahead and this is where I wanna ride out the storm.

[00:59:52] Do you have any comments or thoughts about that?

[00:59:55] **Sunil Amrith:** I think there's no question that those with, wealth and power in the world are, you know, insulating themselves as best they can. And whether this is building bunkers or sea stead or imagining, you know, space colonization, there are all kinds of imaginations at the moment at work on the part of those who have these options and who have the resources to sort of see them through.

[01:00:20] And I think we are going to see very interesting, Eleanor Catton's novel from a couple of years ago called Burnham Wood, which really was really set, in New Zealand and set around just this kind of idea of, billionaire from far away building a bunker and, coming into conflict with local people as a result of that.

[01:00:37] And I no doubt we're gonna see more of that, and no doubt we're gonna see conflicts over territory and over. Resources, that come from those kinds of projects.

[01:00:49] **Nate Hagens:** So are there any, countries that have been particularly open to immigrants, either historically in your research or in the present day? And, might you describe how this political attitude has affected the rest of the cultural, economic and e ecological wellbeing, of these places?

[01:01:07] **Sunil Amrith:** I say this a little mournfully, and I say this with full knowledge that it's not always been a rosy story, but clearly there have been periods where the US has been that country where the US has been, a country that has willingly or less willingly been extraordinarily open to people from around the world.

[01:01:26] And I think that it has shaped so much of what is great about this country and this society, whether it's our universities or our entertainment industry, or the tech industry or the arts. And I think we can see that, and perhaps we take it for granted. I think there's an interesting irony that some of the

countries that a century ago were perhaps most hostile to migration, especially in racialized terms at the end of the 20th century, really changed track.

[01:01:58] And I'm thinking of Australia and Canada, and in some ways you can see, I think I would see their turning outward at that point and their embrace of a kind of politics of military culturalism flawed as it may have been, as, a success.

[01:02:16] **Nate Hagens:** So what advice might you give to individuals who are seeing a lot of new people immigrate to their country, and what attitude or lens or perspective, does your research, lead you to hope they might adopt?

[01:02:30] **Sunil Amrith:** First and foremost, I think maybe the perspective of curiosity. so often we see that. Whatever the political ideology of the time

[01:02:47] when conversations start to happen between those who are new to a society and those who already live there, that opens a space of possibility. It may not be. Utopia. It may not be a sort of happy story that everybody gets along, but I think a, an opening attitude of curiosity, I think is helpful and important.

[01:03:09] empathy, which I think we all aspire to in different ways, but perhaps can be harder to find in, in, especially at this times of crisis and anxiety.

[01:03:19] **Nate Hagens:** I don't aspire to empathy. I have too much, unfortunately, but I, understand your point. let me, flip that on you. what recommendation might you have to individuals who move or migrate to a new place?

[01:03:35] What attitude or perspective might you hope they adopt

[01:03:39] **Sunil Amrith:** on that side of the equation too? I think openness and curiosity can be an asset. And I, speak here both as a migrant myself on many occasions, albeit a very privileged one. And as one who's studied. Migration, including in much, much more difficult conditions.

[01:04:02] I mean, I think that what strikes me, if I think about the horrendous conditions that people move to work on the rubber plantations of Malaysia, in that context, what's really striking is how, as awful as it was, there were all these little ways in which people made a sense of home for themselves.

[01:04:20] And the thing that really sticks in my mind is if you walk through any rubber plantation or formal rubber plantation in Malaysia, you'll still see these small tree shrines that migrant workers built. And there were nothing special. They were just sort of little statues of their deis from home at the base of a tree.

[01:04:38] But it was a sense that we can make our home here, whatever the circumstances. Where are you from? Sun. I'm from a South Indian family. but I was born in Kenya, in Nairobi, and I grew up in Singapore. I've had many, I've had many movements in my life, but like I say, these are movements, from a position of relative privilege and I've been able to choose, well my parents could choose where they went.

[01:05:07] **Nate Hagens:** It's interesting the, the weight and the influence that words have in our language. 'cause this discussion is about migration and migrants and you just told your story of where you've, you're from, and Kenya and Singapore. I wouldn't consider you a migrant yet by the definition you are. I'm not, because I was born in Wisconsin and I pretty much live here.

[01:05:32] Even though I've traveled around, I would consider you a mobile travel professional. but isn't it interesting that's my own bias in the term?

[01:05:45] **Sunil Amrith:** It is a very interesting. Question. And I mean, the anthropologist, Ang ho wrote a piece in 20 years ago in which he said, well, why don't we consider the, English who went to Australia to be migrants?

[01:06:00] It's because they, in a sense, they, took over the society and set up the state. It is, it's a different, relationship.

[01:06:11] **Nate Hagens:** yeah. Language is, is a fascinating thing that has an influence on our future, I think. Yes, it does. so aside from climate pressures, birth rates are now declining globally, for many reasons, but, due to several guests on this show, endocrine disrupting chemicals, on men and women, du reduce sperm count and other things are, a big driver.

[01:06:37] How do you think this could change the conversation around migration and general attitude towards immigrants?

[01:06:43] **Sunil Amrith:** I can see. One of two things happening, and maybe they will both happen at the same time. One is an acceptance that migration is actually inevitable and necessary for survival. There's a little bit of that.

[01:06:55] You start to see in a society like Japan, which has some of the lowest birth rates in the world and a rapidly aging society, Japan has historically been quite hostile to immigration. And there is in a sense, it may not be a, an embrace or a willing acceptance, but some level of acceptance that, you know, even when it comes to vital areas like nursing and care work for an aging population, that migrants are necessary for the future.

[01:07:22] The other path may be a, dissonance, which is to say that there's a resentment of the fact that migration becomes more and more essential to a society's survival. And so in some sense, a dependence on migration is coupled with an increasing hostility to it or resentment of it. And I think you see that in Italy, for example, in other country, which is, has.

[01:07:42] Declining, population in the near future, but which is currently ruled by very anti-immigrant political forces.

[01:07:50] **Nate Hagens:** So Jeremy Grantham was on the program not too long ago, and he said one of the, he speculated that one of the implications of declining birth rate would be an accelerated brain drain towards those economies that were still thriving.

[01:08:05] which isn't a climate thing, but it's separate. And, I hadn't thought about it that way. Do you have any thoughts on that?

[01:08:15] **Sunil Amrith:** I hadn't thought about it that way either, but there's no question that, you know, in the same way that the large increase in the human population in the 19th and 20th century.

[01:08:28] Accompanied a reorganization of the world in terms of who was where. it is likely, I think that the same will happen with a declining population.

[01:08:37] **Nate Hagens:** So, putting you on the spot now, with all your expertise in this field, what is the one or several most critical lesson, that we should be looking at from history that might help us global society navigate this, current moment with respect to the issue of migration?

[01:08:58] **Sunil Amrith:** I think there is a political and institutional sort of takeaway, and I think maybe there's more of an environmental one. The environmental one, and this is something that I know you've talked to many of your guests about Nate, is that, you know, we have to understand in historical perspective that the idea that human growth and flourishing is.

[01:09:24] Immune to natural limits of any kind is one. We need to move beyond politically and institutionally. I think what I would take away is the fact that change can happen very quickly. The world that we've inherited is not the only possible world. The institutions we live in, the political language that we use, none of these emerged fully formed.

[01:09:43] They were all debated, they were all contested, they were all fought over. And I think that gives me some sense that we can imagine the institutions of our global society in a completely new way if we had the will and if we had the imagination.

[01:09:58] **Nate Hagens:** And so on the topic of, coming migration, both within and between countries, what are a couple things that you would advise the viewers of this program to consider and think about and potentially adopt, in their lives, with respect to this issue?

[01:10:19] **Sunil Amrith:** I think. Maybe it's a question of putting together our own personal narratives with our understanding of the society around us, which is to say that there are people who may not over the last 2, 3, 4 generations have ever had to consider migration. There are people around the world who really do see themselves as very much rooted in place.

[01:10:39] and perhaps some portion of those people are going to have to start to contemplate what it might be like for the place that they know so well to change and maybe change unrecognizably. So that's at the sort of personal level. And then to link that to the fact that this is happening everywhere.

[01:10:56] This is happening to people all over the world, that the climate nature itself is not what we're accustomed to thinking it is. We talked about hydrological stability. Most of us are not aware. We took that for granted. But maybe we can start to see that we have, it's a big ask.

[01:11:15] **Nate Hagens:** this is one, one of many things to widen our boundary and our imagination on that are all a little threatening on the surface.

[01:11:24] yeah. So, I don't know how much you follow the podcast, but you know, I, asked some closing questions of all my guests so you could keep it on this topic

or broaden it out, to other aspects of global upheaval, what some call the meta crisis. But do you have any personal advice to the listeners, of the program at this

[01:11:46] **Sunil Amrith:** time?

[01:11:47] I think the first thing I'd say is that the anxiety that I think many listeners and viewers of the program feel about this meta crisis is one that, you know, on a personal note, I share on a daily basis. I think we are living through deeply alarming and unsettling times. And I think at the same time that in some ways despair is a luxury.

[01:12:17] It can very easily lead to nihilism. And so without false hope or artificial hope, I do think that in community and in collectives, wherever and however we might find them, there are still so many things that we can do to make a better world.

[01:12:37] **Nate Hagens:** You personally, Sunil, are watching this movie in your research and before you go to bed, you know, the idea of what's baked in on the climate scenarios and the global population where the concentration is.

[01:12:54] So how do you personally cope with, the replaying of that movie as part of your professional, vocation over and over?

[01:13:03] **Sunil Amrith:** That's a very thoughtful question. Nate. Thank you. I sometimes I have to stop the movie. and I think. It's very important for me in my own life. And I think this may well be true for many listeners to, you know, to find joy where we find it, in my case, in music.

[01:13:20] And, you know, for, listeners and viewers, I think wherever you might find it. But I think there are times I'm not thinking about the climate crisis and I

think that's really quite important. Totally agree. So are you teaching now or mostly

[01:13:31] **Nate Hagens:** research? Both. I, teach regularly. What are your classes this semester or next?

[01:13:37] **Sunil Amrith:** This semester, I'm about to start a, a class on modern South Asia. So really kind of bread and butter, graduate seminar on South Asian history. But I also teach classes on global environmental history, on environmental justice, on migration.

[01:13:51] **Nate Hagens:** You obviously, cover some intense and current event relevant, topics with your young humans in those classes at Yale.

[01:14:03] What specific recommendations do you have for young people in their teens and twenties who become aware of this broader environmental and economic, constraints?

[01:14:13] **Sunil Amrith:** I mean, I think in some ways I'd almost turn that around and say that in the end I learn more from them than I do from all the reading that I do because they've grown up with this awareness.

[01:14:23] And in a way, they're the first generation to do so. my own children who are 11 and seven years old, I mean, they have been aware of environmental threats and climate crisis from a very young age. Not necessarily because we've consciously told them about these things, but it's, there. And so I would say to them, you're the first generation for 200 years, we, or at least those of us in the world with.

[01:14:49] Some wealth and power have taken for granted the idea that there are no limits, and in some sense, if we're going to understand what human flourishing could look like within these limits, it's their generation who is gonna show

[01:15:01] **Nate Hagens:** us that way. So given the environmental catastrophes or the environmental pressures of the past that cause human migrations in the past, this one at least potentially is different.

[01:15:13] First of all, 'cause it's global. secondly, because we are aware of it kind of in the same way a boiling frog might be in, in a intellectual, neocortex sort of way. So these young people, you're right, they have been aware of what's kind of predicted in coming decades. So is that a blessing or a curse?

[01:15:35] Is it a curse in the sense that they constantly have to play this movie about the future? Or is it a blessing in that they're prepared for a new narrative and they have more empathy and concern or what, is your, what do you think about that?

[01:15:50] **Sunil Amrith:** I think it's both at the same time. I mean, there's a lot of work that psychologists have done on ecological anxiety, ecological grief.

[01:15:58] I think there's are very real things. And at the same time, I think there is a certain creativity and imagination that I certainly see in my students, which is not nihilistic and which is not despairing. One could say that it's utopian perhaps, but I think we need some of that.

[01:16:21] **Nate Hagens:** What do you care most about in the world, Sunil?

[01:16:24] **Sunil Amrith:** My children, my students. and so I suppose you could say about the future because, you know about the world that they will inherit and that they will make.

[01:16:37] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah, they're definitely intertwined. If you could wave a magic wand and there was no personal recourse to your decision or your tenure at Yale, et cetera, what is one thing you would do to improve human and planetary futures?

[01:16:52] **Sunil Amrith:** I would introduce lavishly funded free public education from. Preschool through to college, and I think the key there is lavishly funded. You know, we all know what underfunded public education looks like. I think a transformative change in the world would come from, you know, finished levels of investment in education for everybody

[01:17:14] **Nate Hagens:** agreed.

[01:17:16] With a caveat education about what the current college curriculums and high school curriculums, just distributed more for, getting people into the existing labor force with our current aspirations and goals. and objectives, or would you also change the education?

[01:17:35] **Sunil Amrith:** I changed the education. I think you asked, the best possible question, and in some sense, you know, the conversations you have on this podcast get us towards, you know, what shift in mindset perspective do we need to prepare young people for the world that we are now living in and that we're gonna live in.

[01:17:55] **Nate Hagens:** If you were to come back on the show in six months or a year, what is one, you know, you're, a curious human, you're in, the academy and you're a teacher, but what is, like something you're really curious about, a research question that's relevant to, our collective futures that you would be willing to take a deep dive on in the future?

[01:18:16] **Sunil Amrith:** The theme I'm thinking about at the moment is the idea of repair in the biggest sort of meta sense. You know, what would it mean to repair our planet and our relationship with our planet? But then to kind of take that really down to very material sense, you know, what is it to repair a pipeline? What is it to repair, the infrastructures that we live with?

[01:18:38] And so that's the big idea that I'm delving into, both in a slightly philosophical way and in terms of research that I'm doing. I'm not sure that I'll be anywhere further in six months, but certainly, you know, at some point. are you writing another book? On, the theme of repair. I am. Oh, on the, okay.

[01:18:56] Wow. Awesome. But I'm

[01:18:58] **Nate Hagens:** only

[01:18:58] **Sunil Amrith:** just getting started.

[01:18:59] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Thank you so much for your time and, your commitment to this important topic. Thank you for having me, Nate. I've really enjoyed our

[01:19:06] **Sunil Amrith:** conversation.

[01:19:07] **Nate Hagens:** do you have any closing comments for people watching listening who understand and, agree with what you've laid out here today?

[01:19:14] **Sunil Amrith:** You are not alone. There are many of us, I think, who care very much about these things. All of the listeners to this podcast, all of the listeners, to, many other podcasts and programs that are trying to. Shift us towards a new way of thinking, and I think that knowledge in and of itself will hopefully spur us to solidarity, to connecting with each other and to working together.

[01:19:37] Thanks, Sunil. Thank you.

[01:19:39] **Nate Hagens:** If you enjoyed or learned from this episode of The Great Simplification, please follow us on your favorite podcast platform. You can also visit The Great Simplification dot com for references and show notes from today's conversation. And to connect with fellow listeners of this podcast, check out our Discord channel.

[01:20:01] This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Stinnett, Leslie Balu, Brady Hyen, and Lizzie Siri.