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Are you ready to join the fight against the coming of the Anthropocene?

A new art project asks people to work together to delay the potential new era marked by humanity's reshaping of the Earth, instead of just accepting that we don't have much time left.



[Photo: courtesy Jonathon Keats]

BY ADELE PETERS

Scientists call the geological period we currently live in the Holocene, which began about 12,000 years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age. Earlier this year, a panel of scientists [voted](#) to take another step forward and declare that we have entered a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene. It's called that because scientists argue that the Earth has been fundamentally reshaped not by natural forces but by humans, as we've mined mountaintops, changed the chemistry of the atmosphere and oceans, set off atomic bombs that scattered radioactive debris around the world, and created [plastic rocks](#). By 2021, the scientists plan to submit a formal proposal to the international commission that can officially declare that the Holocene has ended.



[Photo: courtesy Jonathon Keats]

In a new project, artist and “experimental philosopher” Jonathon Keats argues that we should reconsider the change. “It makes perfect sense on one level—the amount of damage that we are doing on this planet is geological in scale and scope,” he says. But epochs typically last millions of years; the Holocene is comparatively new. “To make the claim that we’re entering into such an epoch in a sense is to resign ourselves to entering into a very long period where we effectively are running things into the ground.” An exhibit about the project will open at the Modernism Gallery in San Francisco on September 5.



[Photo: courtesy Jonathon Keats]

Instead of accepting the Anthropocene as a foregone conclusion, he says, we should take the idea as a challenge: In the few years left before geologists declare the Holocene dead, we could try to save it. His new organization, called The Pioneers of the Greater Holocene, will launch first in San Francisco and use volunteers to document parts of the Bay Area that are more natural and could be a model for transforming more human-dominated spaces. The “pioneers” will also take small steps to rewild the city, planting native seeds that can begin to take root along streets and sidewalks.



[Photo: courtesy Jonathon Keats]

The steps are small, but Keats thinks that this type of small action can help propel people out of paralysis on environmental issues. “In order to make [larger political] changes, what we need to do is to have a population that is proactive already,” he says. “It’s a matter of that initial threshold. . . . It may only be a gesture initially, but that gets people out into their own midst in terms of grappling with the Anthropocene rather than simply resigning themselves to the fact that we’ve entered into an epoch where all is lost and we’re so incredibly depressed at this point. The anxiety level is basically paralyzing for people by and large. And that’s understandable, but it isn’t going to help.”

With the right action, leading to a more balanced human existence with the natural world, the Anthropocene could be downgraded from an epoch to a shorter “age” that’s still part of the Holocene. “The Greater Holocene actually is politically and economically necessary for humanity,” Keats says. “I don’t see how humans can survive in the Anthropocene, if the Anthropocene is an epoch potentially on the order of millions of years.”