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Stop acting shocked by extent of climate change – do something about it

There is nothing surprising about the recent record-breaking temperatures, and yet policymakers and people at large continue to look the other way

Benjamin Horton



June 2023 was the hottest June on record, and the year will become the hottest year on record. PHOTO: AFP

UPDATED 4 HOURS AGO ▾

To anyone who has been following the debate on climate change, recent developments will have come as no surprise.

Climate change is out of control – and we have known that to be the case for years. Yet, we act shocked when fresh evidence strikes us in the face – while we continue to ignore all warnings.

July 3 was the warmest day ever recorded. The record was then broken on July 4 and again on July 6. The world has seen its hottest seven days in a row. June 2023 was the hottest June on record, and the year will become the hottest year on record.

The southern United States has been sweltering under an intense heat dome in recent weeks, including on the national Fourth of July holiday.

Canada had wildfires that burnt so furiously in June that toxic smoke affected areas across the US.

In India, morgues and hospitals became overwhelmed after temperatures hit 45 deg C in some areas – at least 96 people reportedly died from heat-aggravated conditions. In parts of China, an enduring heatwave has continued, with temperatures exceeding 35 deg C.

Unfortunately, the record-breaking temperatures are playing out exactly as the climate community had warned; they are not an unanticipated surge.

For four decades, scientists across the globe have tried to warn humanity about the unmitigated burning of fossil fuels. We have predicted debilitating heatwaves, crushing droughts and rising seas. We have courted the media on countless occasions and practically begged policymakers to cut the use of coal, oil and gas. But for the most part, scientists like myself have been ignored.

Since 1990, when the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its first report on global warming, carbon dioxide emissions have climbed by about 70 per cent.

Kicking the can down the road

Many policymakers think they have more pressing matters to deal with than hitting net zero goals. Indeed, we are in the middle of the Ukraine war, and it has been only a year since Covid-19 pandemic curbs were eased.

Policymakers think action to tackle the climate emergency can be put off to another day when, fingers crossed, science and market forces will come up with a solution that will allow us all to consume as much as we like without destroying the planet.

For those in positions of power, the temptation to delay action remains strong. British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's plan to renege on the government's £11.6 billion (\$\$20 billion) pledge to help poor countries deal with climate change is a case in point. But it would be wrong to assume it is only the politicians who are at fault.

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Our political masters respond to the signals they get from the public, and the message is by no means as clear-cut as those urging more drastic action on the climate emergency would hope. In part, that's due to the cost-of-living crisis, but it goes deeper than that.

Here in Singapore, for example, in the past week there was more demand, especially on social media, for a response to the Taylor Swift ticket crisis rather than a climate crisis.

My passion is football, but many support football teams sponsored by fossil fuel interests, and the fans really don't care if the new star striker is bought with Middle East oil money so long as he scores plenty of goals.

The existential threat of climate change is real.

I have a phrase – If you knew what I do about what Mother Earth is capable of in a changing climate, you would be very scared.

Policymakers, scientists and the thinking public now have a will to find solutions – be they engineering, financial or institutional – that can be brought to bear to solve the climate emergency.

No nation, whether large or small, rich or poor, will be immune from the impacts of climate and environmental change.

We are already experiencing this in Singapore, where we are seeing floods on sunny days, extreme rainfall, winds and very high temperatures.

Sometimes, developments that don't make headlines are even more worrying. In the Antarctic, temperatures were 10 deg C to 20 deg C higher than the averages from 1979 to 2000. Just think of that – the supposedly coldest place on the planet basking in temperatures you normally find in the mid-latitudes.

Ominously, it looks as though things are only going to get hotter, as the World Meteorological Organisation has forecast that global temperatures are likely to surge to record levels in the next five years. The earth has not seen such temperatures since the Eemian geological period some 120,000 years ago.

But I do not believe this planet is condemned to ever-rising temperatures and sea levels. I believe these are problems that were caused by men and women, and they can be solved by us.

We need new economic theories. Of course, we must still strive to eradicate global poverty and continue with economic growth, but we must do this within the means of the planet's limited natural resources.

In truth, the real fantasists are those who cling to the belief that we can continue to exploit the natural world to satisfy our desires.



Canada had wildfires that burnt so furiously in June that toxic smoke affected areas across the US. PHOTO: NYTIMES

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In the end, economic prosperity will depend on human and natural well-being. To achieve this, we must transform governance systems, making these regenerative and distributive instead of finite and egotistical.

We must act urgently.

I believe there is such a thing as being too late. When it comes to climate and environmental change, the hour is almost upon us.

Hottest day ever recorded on the planet



Time is running out

After 25 years of working to raise climate urgency, I've concluded that the public in general, and world leaders in particular, underestimate how rapid, serious and permanent climate and ecological breakdown will be if humanity fails to mobilise.

There may be only a few years left before humanity expends the remaining "carbon budget" to stay under 1.5 deg C of global heating at today's emissions rates – a level of heating I am not confident will be compatible with civilisation as we know it.

And there may only be five to 10 years before the Amazon rainforest and a large part of the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheet pass irreversible tipping points, leading to sea-level rise that will ultimately flood Singapore and potentially remove it from the world map.

The earth's system is breaking down now with breathtaking speed.

To inform the public, I hope to tell climate stories that matter. Instead of stories that create comforting distance from the grave danger we are in via unrealistic techno fixes for unrealistic disaster scenarios, humanity needs stories that highlight the many absurdities that arise from collectively knowing what's coming while collectively failing to act.

We need stories that show humanity responding rationally to the crisis.

We need stories that show success.

For example, in June 2023, the Swiss voted yes to a new climate law that will see the country cut net greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050.

Humanity needs to confront the fossil fuel industry head-on, accept that we need to consume less energy, and switch into full-on emergency mode. The sense of solidarity and relief we'd feel once this happens would be game-changing for our species.

More and better facts will not catalyse this sociocultural tipping point, but more and better stories might.

- Professor Benjamin Horton is a director of Nanyang Technological University's Earth Observatory of Singapore.

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Record-breaking COE's impact on Singapore society



In Your Opinion

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