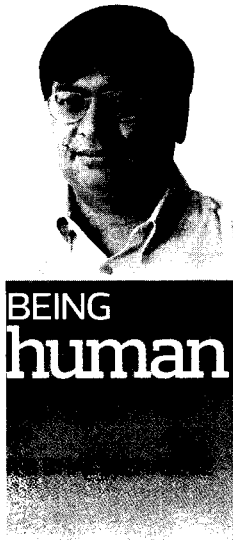


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Why does the warmest year on record leave the world cold?



We are sitting ducks for the coming climate crisis, but ironically, the world today is mostly carrying on as if we were merely in for an inconvenient bit of heavy rain.

The issue right now is not that disastrous climate change is well under way, but why the global populace is still largely unresponsive to the growing torrent of indications that life on earth is coming under increasing stress because of human interference with the environment.

The latest State of the Climate report, released last week by the American Meteorological Society, confirms that last year was the warmest year on record for the land and sea.

The study, based on the work of 450 scientists worldwide, recorded the “toppling of several symbolic mileposts” in heat, sea-level rise and extreme weather in 2015.

The UK’s *Guardian* newspaper, which is faithfully documenting this story of epic human folly, wrote that the report shows that “the world is careening towards an environment never before experienced by humans”.

First, let’s get a short take on the details, as described in that newspaper.

Last year was the warmest on record, making the world now 1°C warmer than in pre-industrial times, largely due to a huge increase in the production of greenhouse gases, and 2016 is predicted to break that record again.

The oceans, which absorb more than 90% of the extra CO₂ released into the air, also reached a new record temperature, particularly in the Arctic, where the temperature in August hit a

dizzying 8°C above average, the *Guardian* said.

Another high was that the thermal expansion of the oceans, compounded by melting glaciers, resulted in the highest global sea level on record in 2015.

These changes are being driven by a CO₂ concentration that surpassed the symbolic 400 parts per million mark at the Mauna Loa research station in Hawaii last year.

The Arctic’s sea ice covered a smaller area last winter than ever before in the 37-year satellite record; there was a net annual loss of ice in the world’s alpine glaciers for the 36th consecutive year; and the Greenland ice sheet melted over more than 50% of its surface. Should the ice sheet disintegrate, sea levels would balloon by around 7m.

The impacts of these changes may have profound consequences for humans and other species. A lack of rainfall aggravated “intense and widespread” forest fires in Indonesia that belched out a disastrous amount of greenhouse gases. In June last year, a severe heatwave claimed over 1,000 lives in Karachi and severe drought caused food shortages for millions in Ethiopia.

To grasp the dire implications of these trends, it helps to get an iconoclastic view like that of George Monbiot, who wrote on the subject in an opinion piece for the *Guardian* last week.

Referencing the evidence presented in the report, he comments: “In one respect, the scientists were wrong. They told us to expect a climate crisis in the second half of this century. But it’s already here.”

Monbiot warns against holding our breaths for political leaders to save the day with aggressive

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action on climate change, although 177 nations pledged in Paris last year to try and keep a lid on world temperatures.

Hillary Clinton's campaign now promises a national and global mobilisation "on a scale not seen since World War II". She will seek a slew of radical measures to protect the environment, and to ensure the US is "running entirely on clean energy by mid-century".

However, he notes "some crashing contradictions" in her platform. "It boasts about record sales in the car industry and promises to cut 'red tape', which is the term used by corporate lobbyists for the public protections they hate." But where it is good, Monbiot acknowledges, it is very good.

As for Donald Trump, Monbiot says: "Well, what did you expect? Climate change is a 'con-job' and a 'hoax' that was 'created by and for the Chinese in order to make US manufacturing non-competitive'. His manifesto reads like a love letter to the coal industry."

At this juncture, it is pertinent to note a similar gap between Malaysia's intentions to address the climate crisis and its energy generation profile. While renewable energy is receiving increasing attention, the Sustainable Energy Development Authority has set a modest target of 11% of the country's energy mix by 2020 for the sector. At the same time, non-renewables, primarily natural gas, and coal and coke, are currently the two largest sources of fuel for the country's power

stations, according to the Energy Commission.

Malaysian firms are also tapping into the power generation market overseas, building coal-fired plants in Vietnam, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

To avert climate chaos, nothing less than a radical change from high consumption lifestyles will be adequate to slash the production of greenhouse gases that are causing global temperatures to rise to dangerous levels.

This is a moment in human history when ordinary people everywhere have a chance to make a difference by living on less so that the most vulnerable communities around the world can be spared an apocalyptic fate.

It is also a test of our capacity to sacrifice for the sake of future generations who would be born into a world where food supplies could become precarious due to adverse climate events, severe pressure could be put on coastal communities that are in the way of a rising sea, new diseases may spread due to changing ecosystems, water scarcity may become the new normal for more and more communities, super hurricanes and unprecedented flooding may leave vast numbers in need of emergency aid, and, unfortunately, much more than all this.

We could choose to change now, or wait to find out whether we are next in the line to become a disaster statistic. **E**

R B Bhattacharjee is associate editor at *The Edge Malaysia*