

CLIMATE CHANGE

‘Climate change: this is the worst scientific scandal of our generation. Our hopelessly compromised scientific establishment cannot be allowed to get away with the Climategate whitewash, says Christopher Booker’ (Daily Telegraph)

If you Google ‘climate change’ a link to the above quote soon appears. So is man-made climate change real? Or is it too difficult to tell, when scientists disagree about the facts.

The reality is that virtually all scientists agree that the Earth is warming at an alarming rate, and that we’re to blame. Scientists are an argumentative bunch, and to have such agreement is very unusual. No credible evidence has emerged to challenge this consensus, despite some claims in the media.

Does it matter that much? 2 degrees C doesn’t sound like much – don’t the day to day temperatures we experience change far more than that? Actually, it matters a lot, not only for future generations; it’s already affecting people now, especially in the developing world. The reality is that the greenhouse gasses doing the damage are produced mainly by the rich countries, but it’s mainly people in poorer countries who are suffering. For example the catastrophic flooding in South Asia, deserts encroaching on farmland, and monsoon rains becoming less reliable. While individual events cannot necessarily be attributed to climate change, the overall pattern of cause and effect is clear.

For me, this is a matter of justice, and Christians should be outraged. How can we as rich people treat our poorer neighbours like this? Here’s what Tearfund says: ‘The Bible tells us that ‘love does no harm to its neighbour’, yet the way we live now harms our neighbours in poor countries. Tearfund is campaigning to convince world leaders to take drastic action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and help poor countries adapt to the devastating impacts of climate change.’

Now that we know what’s happening, we can’t turn a blind eye to this injustice. Please think about how you can help by telling the Government what you think, and by making changes to your own lifestyle.

For detailed information, see NASA web site: <https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>

Malcolm Smith

5th September 2017

COUNTING CALORIES OR ORANG-UTANS?

If you ever see me in the supermarket studying the back of a packet of biscuits, I'm not actually on a diet, but trying to save the rainforest. I'm studying the list of ingredients looking for palm oil, palm fat, palm kernel oil, or any of the 170 different ways in which the company could word it. Palm oil may seem like a harmless product, just trying to smooth out your Nutella, but palm plantations are partially responsible for the destruction of the world's rainforests. According to the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), 300 football fields worth of rainforest is cleared every hour to allow palm oil production to continue. This has led the United Nations Environment Program to declare the oil to be the main cause of deforestation in both Malaysia and Indonesia.

Such decimation of rainforests is pushing many species to extinction. An estimated 1000-5000 Orang-utans are killed every year for the development of palm oil plantations. Findings show that if nothing changes they could become extinct in the wild within 5-10 years, with Sumatran tigers possibly disappearing in the next 3 years. Orang-utans are vital to the ecosystem of the rainforest as many seeds need to pass through the gut of an Orang-utan before they can grow. Therefore, not only are palm oil plantations causing the rainforest to be cut down, but they are also responsible for the death of the animals which would help it to regrow.

Deforestation also has an impact on the indigenous communities which have lived off the rainforest for centuries. While palm oil production has often been sold as a way to bring employment to these areas, many indigenous people only become plantation workers because their livelihoods have been destroyed by the eradication of the rainforest. This industry has also been linked to major human rights violations, including child labour and indigenous rights abuses. It has also brought humans into areas which were once the domain of wild animals, which has resulted in an increase in both human and animal deaths. Between 1998 and 2011, a total of 638 human-tiger conflicts were recorded in Sumatra, in which tigers killed 72 people and wounded 63 more. These conflicts resulted in the deaths of 59 tigers - a significant loss considering that only an estimated 400 Sumatran tigers remain in the wild today.

Palm oil production is closely associated with climate change. For the plantations to be set up, large amounts of timber and undergrowth is often burned. This emits huge amounts of smoke and carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and makes Indonesia a top 10 contributor of greenhouse gases. Most palm oil expansion happens at the expense of biodiversity and ecosystems in the places where it is produced. It also causes severe damage to the landscape, and has been linked to land erosion and river pollution. Rainforest roots hold the ground together, and without them rainfall can cause serious erosion. This, along with the detrimental effects this industry has upon animal welfare and human rights, convinces me that no chocolate is worth risking the future of our planet. So next time you go for your weekly shop, have a look. Check your toothpaste, check your bread. Check your ice cream, check your margarine, check everywhere! See if you can make the difference.

Lots more information is available at: http://www.saynotopalmoil.com/Whats_the_issue.

Mairi and Iona Whitehead.

5th September 2017

CASH CROPS: Good or Bad?

Developing cash crops for export to the wealthy markets in Europe and North America appears to make good economic sense for farmers in Africa and South America, generating more income than would have been possible through serving local markets. However, the gains achieved may be short lived and cause greater damage in the longer term.

Recent research into the international trade in quinoa from the Andes has dispelled some fears that this was depriving locals of a rich source of affordable protein. The same research has however shown that soil quality is degrading as farmers transfer more land from llama herding to quinoa cultivation, which in turn leads to a reduction in natural fertiliser to replace the soil nutrients. The economic benefits may also be degraded as farmers in other parts of the world look to take a share of this super-food market, with the possibility that the market could collapse, leaving the Andean farmers in a worse position than before.

The European market for out-of-season cut flowers has created many jobs in East African flower farms. Increased levels of ill-health amongst the work-force is however attributed to the fertilisers and pesticides used, while the high water consumption involved in flower growing is diverting resources from other food crops and livestock. Of course, there is also the small matter of the environmental cost of flying those cut flowers to the consumer before they have wilted away to nothing.

The big social and ethical question is, how can we support economic growth in these regions without it costing the earth?

David Williamson
5th September 2017

THE ETHICS OF SPEED

We are so used to being able to obtain whatever we “need” immediately, that most of us never think about what is required to make that possible. Buying over the internet (or by phone) from abroad, and having goods delivered within 24 – 48 hours, requires very rapid transits for goods, often over thousands of miles. But does this have an environmental cost?

In an industry I understand, speed is a constant pressure. The UK rail network is seeing constant growth in demand, and additional capacity is required all over the network. From HS2 to EGIP to the ‘Norwich in 90’ campaign, increased capacity is demanded, which is economically justified by shorter journey times, which in turn leads to increased revenue with which to pay for the additional capacity.

Take EGIP (Edinburgh Glasgow Improvement Programme). Peak demand on Edinburgh to Glasgow services is such that more carriages are essential. Moving from 6 to 8 coaches on the busiest trains tips the economic balance towards electric trains, so electrification of the route becomes essential. The cost (around £700 million) has to be justified in terms of increased revenue, and this can only be “demonstrated” (assumed might be a better word) if journey times are reduced, even though this will drive demand further. To achieve this, we are moving from diesel trains with 1 megawatt (MW) of power (to cover all uses) to electric trains with 2.1 MW of traction power and 0.5 MW of auxiliary power. Although this will be generated and used more efficiently, 2.5 times more power is needed to reduce the journey time sufficiently to justify the expenditure.

Does our need for speed, to have it now, to be there sooner, justify the immense demands for power we make, with its consequent effects on our environment?

Graham Whitehead

5th September 2017