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Climate Crisis

Wildfires and warming seas: 2023 is the year that has offered a grim glimpse of the future

A type of cognitive dissonance appears to have taken hold as regards climate change, with efforts to combat the issue as sluggish as ever

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Despite all the grave news, including record burning of wildfires in across Canada, life continued as normal for most people. Photograph: Renaud Philippe/The New York Times

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For many, it was the realization that global warming became a reality. From the shattering of monthly global temperature records in May, June and July to wildfires of unprecedented frequency and ferocity in Canada and Europe, the effects of [climate change](#) were clearly felt across the developed world.

Most striking were news images of hundreds of tourists being hurriedly evacuated from the Greek islands, with accompanying stories of uncomfortable days and nights spent in schools and community centres while holidaymakers desperately waited for flights home.

Thus, future historians may report that the summer of 2023 was the moment when global warming became real for many in the first world. However, none of this came as any great surprise to climate scientists. After all, this year was the first for some time where man-made climate change coincided with the El Niño warming cycle (the latter is a natural warming cycle in wind and sea surface temperatures that occurs every few years in the Pacific Ocean).

However, the widespread smashing of temperature records across the globe was still quite a shock, as was an unprecedented warming of sea temperatures in the Atlantic.

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Social media and tabloid newspapers still feature many articles by people who question the basic evidence that greenhouse gases are warming our atmosphere

The latter is a source of major concern. While a gradual warming of the oceans due to global warming has long been predicted, the pace of temperature change in the Atlantic caught even climate scientists by surprise. The most obvious explanation is that this rapid warming is due to a loss of ice from the polar ice cap, causing a decrease in the reflection of sunlight and an increase in the absorption of heat by the oceans.

Thus, it may be the first direct manifestation of a positive feedback effect in global warming – a clear signal that, once under way, global warming may accelerate.

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Despite all this grave news, life continued as normal for most people. TV advertisements continued to offer holiday breaks in Greece and Turkey throughout July and August while airlines continued to fly tourists to the hottest parts of Europe throughout the summer. It seems the notion of a summer sun holiday abroad is a difficult habit to break, irrespective of reports of frightening heatwaves in popular destinations.

Indeed, a type of cognitive dissonance appears to have taken hold as regards climate change. Dire news bulletins about forest fires in hot countries are often immediately succeeded by adverts for sun holidays in the same country or adverts for large SUVs. In another example, the British Conservative party won a key by-election in July by promising to scrap a proposal to impose a carbon tax on high-emitting vehicles. In a warming world, one might have expected a rational electorate to vote for – not against – carbon taxes, but the opposite happened. Indeed, the vote appears to form part of an “anti-woke” agenda common in English-speaking countries.

One reason for this attitude may be a continued scepticism in some quarters about both the nature and causes of global warming. As the effects of climate change become more and more evident, one might have expected these voices to fall silent. Instead, social media and tabloid newspapers still feature many articles by people who question the basic evidence that greenhouse gases are warming our atmosphere. Few, if any, of these voices have any credibility in science, yet they are everywhere and have influence.

This issue is most severe in the US, where the topic of climate change has somehow become part of a “culture war” between politicians of the right and left. Indeed, it is almost an article of faith among prominent Republican politicians that man-made climate change is exaggerated, or even a hoax.

While the possibility of Trump regaining the White house is a cause of great concern to citizens all over the world, in fact the election of any of the Republican candidates to the US presidency will almost certainly result in an immediate rollback of all US legislation that seeks to reduce carbon emissions, with dire consequences for international agreements to combat climate change.

Overall, 2023 will probably be remembered as the year that the effects of man-made climate change became clearly manifest in the first world, while efforts to combat the problem remained as sluggish as ever.

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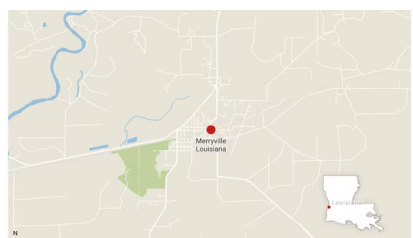
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