

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the ever-present threat of climate change and invites your thoughts on the subject.

Do you remember a fad called 'climate change'? Last year, it was all the rage. A 16-year-old Swedish girl did what the world's leaders failed to do – she pushed it to the top of the political agenda. Everyone was talking about this imminent threat to life on Earth.

But sadly, like all fads, it's been and gone. Maybe not forgotten, but definitely put on the back burner. The reason, of course, is that we've got another crisis to worry about: COVID-19. And it seems that politicians (and much of the press) can only cope with one crisis at a time. Thanks to the pandemic, even the UN Climate Change Conference, originally set for November 2020, was postponed until November 2021.

Subconsciously, we're not quite as worried as we were, because we've been told that worldwide lockdowns mean fewer greenhouse gas emissions. That's true but, according to the UN, even if we were to stay locked down for the next 10 years, the reduced emissions still wouldn't be enough to fix the problem. Global warming has not hit the pause button just because of a virus.

Any politician who declares that COVID-19 is 'the biggest challenge the world has faced in a generation' (a claim I've heard on many occasions) hasn't grasped the severity of climate change (which David Attenborough describes, more accurately, as "Our greatest threat in thousands of years").

The reason is obvious. The global pandemic is easy to understand (there's a horrible bug out there that might get you if you socialise with other people), it's immediate (it dominates our day-to-day lives) and it's personal (we empathise with those hit and fear for ourselves and our loved ones). It's also finite (with a little luck, and a suitable vaccine, it will all be over in a year or two).

This is why most governments have acted quickly and fast-tracked billions in bailout funds and relief packages. And it's why we've all been prepared to change our ways of life radically and almost overnight.

But climate change is different. It is difficult to understand (even the scientists can't agree on all the minutiae), more gradual (it's been likened to Armageddon in slow motion)

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and more insidious (we can't quite see how it's going to affect us or anyone we know). Worse, there is no end in sight (at the very best we face disastrous consequences; at the very worst the consequences are catastrophic).

Scientists have repeatedly warned that climate change is likely to kill millions, cost trillions and completely transform the way we live. But just because the likely consequences are harder to measure or predict doesn't make the impact of rising sea levels, worsening tropical storms, intensifying wild fires, increased flooding, more frequent crop failures or the additional toll of mass displacement and armed conflict (over dwindling water resources, for example) any less critical.

In an ideal world, we would take all the energy and commitment in tackling COVID-19 and apply it to this far greater crisis. As the UN climate chief, Patricia Espinosa, said recently, we could use it as an opportunity to reshape the 21st century economy "in ways that are clean, green, healthy, safe and more resilient".

But in the real world, most politicians think only in the short-term and dislike spending money on preventative action (unless it's to show military might). Past evidence indicates that they're going to prevaricate, procrastinate and negotiate until a much bigger disaster smacks us in the face. Then the global pandemic will seem like the good old days. 🌍

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Increasingly severe weather is impacting people and wildlife around the world.