

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the urgent need to make powerful individuals culpable for the environmental damage they wreak.

Am I the only one who believes the president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, should be behind bars? I doubt it. So should top executives at Southern Water, directors and CEOs of Big Oil and, indeed, anyone else responsible for deliberately or negligently causing serious and lasting damage to the natural environment.

The technical term for their crimes is ecocide. Committed repeatedly over many decades, it's ecocide that has created the climate and ecological emergency we now face.

There is growing scrutiny of the environmental performance of companies around the world (about time too) and they are occasionally found guilty of damage to the environment and ordered to pay fines or legal costs. But they've already budgeted for these 'expenses' and simply carry on regardless. The individuals responsible are not being held to account.

Southern Water is a good example. The privatised firm was recently fined a record £90 million for deliberately pouring between 16bn and 21bn litres of untreated raw sewage into highly sensitive protected seas off Kent and Hampshire. Southern Water has a long history of criminal activity – with 168 previous offences and cautions – but, to quote from the official sentencing, continued to “show a shocking and wholesale disregard for the environment”.

Why should the individuals responsible for such a wicked crime be allowed to hide behind their corporate façade? After all, the prosecution highlighted “long-term corporate

knowledge” of what was happening. The culprits should be fined and thrown into jail. No more richly undeserved bonuses for them.

Ecocide is also committed by governments, of course. Bolsonaro is one of several presidents who many view as guilty of horrendous environmental crimes. Brazilian academics and activists have warned that, if he remains president, the collapse of the Amazon rainforest is inevitable under the relentless onslaught of fire, drought and land clearance. His determination to placate the powerful agribusiness lobby has global repercussions – an utterly shocking loss of biodiversity and, even worse, a dramatic acceleration of global warming (burning of the Amazon rainforest now produces three times more greenhouse gases than the remaining forest is able to absorb).

Perhaps the worst offenders are the top executives of Big Oil. We now

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know that the fossil fuel industry's own scientists were warning them about global warming at least half a century ago. What did they do? They spent a fortune on PR campaigns designed to confuse both the press (which regurgitated their lies to an unsuspecting public) and gullible or corrupt politicians about the dangers posed by burning fossil fuels. While concocting a counter narrative to undermine scientific consensus on global warming, they even funded sham ‘research’ organisations to deny the real science. This is corporate deception on a mind-bending scale.

There is pressure to add ecocide to the list of crimes judged by the International Criminal Court (ICC), along with genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and crimes of aggression. This would enable the individuals responsible to be prosecuted. But the ICC's 123-member states do not include the USA, China or India – three of the biggest culprits – and they would never consider a domestic atrocity like the one committed by Southern Water. So national legislation is urgently needed too.

Companies don't make decisions. People do. If they knew they could be made personally responsible for their crimes, maybe they would think twice about sacrificing the health of the planet for their own personal gain? After all, they only care about themselves. 🙄

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



Personal responsibility could curb polluters.