

## How do you respond to political intransigence?

### **2019 was another tough year for the environment [Castelvecchi et al. 2019]**

Up to one million plant and animal species now face extinction owing to habitat destruction and/or climate change, warns a recently published report of the Intergovernmental Science–Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). *The overwhelming evidence of the IPBES Global Assessment, from a wide range of different fields of knowledge, presents an ominous picture*, said IPBES Chair, Sir Robert Watson. *The health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever. We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide* [IPBES 2019].

Moreover, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) special report calls for drastic efforts to curb our demand for agricultural land and to promote the adoption of a plant-based diet for humans. Without such action, the IPCC says, governments will fall short of their collective goals under the 2015 Paris climate accord, in which nations agreed to limit global warming to no more than 2 C above pre-industrial levels. The IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate [IPCC 2019], approved on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 2019 by the 195 IPCC member governments, provides new evidence for the benefits of limiting global warming to the lowest possible level in line with the goal that governments set themselves in the 2015 Paris Agreement. Urgently reducing greenhouse gas emissions can limit the scale of ocean and cryosphere changes.

*The open sea, the Arctic, the Antarctic and the high mountains may seem far away to many people, said Hoesung Lee, Chair of the IPCC, but we depend on them and are influenced by them directly and indirectly in many ways – for weather and climate, for food and water, for energy, trade, transport, recreation and tourism, for health and wellbeing, for culture and identity... If we reduce emissions sharply, consequences for people and their livelihoods will still be challenging, but potentially more manageable for those who are most vulnerable, Lee said. We increase our ability to build resilience and there will be more benefits for sustainable development.*

### **Unfortunately political trends seemed to be moving in the opposite direction**

The Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, took over the helm in January with a fiery anti-environmental agenda. He slashed federal funding for science and in July he even accused his own government's scientists of lying about a deforestation peak in the Amazon.

In the United States (US), President Donald Trump continued his efforts to dismantle environmental regulations. In June, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) finalised a plan to relax limits on greenhouse gas emissions from power plants, eviscerating one of former president Barack Obama's flagship climate policies [Tollefson 2019]. In August, the EPA followed suit with a proposal to freeze fuel-efficiency standards for automobiles. In addition, the president announced that his administration was revoking a decision by California's authority to introduce stricter car emission rules than those issued by federal regulators. Critics had claimed that the move would result in less fuel-efficient cars

that would result in more planet-heating pollution. And in November, the administration began the official process of pulling the United States out of the Paris agreement. The Trump administration had already announced that it planned to pull out in its first year in office, but a country cannot formally even begin to withdraw until three years after the agreement goes into force. As far as the United States was concerned, that was November 4, 2019. Even so, the US is not quite out yet. It takes exactly one extra year for the withdrawal notice to become official, meaning that the US will formally pull out of the Paris agreement one day after the 2020 US presidential election!

The ambition of the Belgian climate policy is inversely proportional to the number of delegates to COP25 in Madrid. Frans Timmermans, Executive Vice-President responsible for the European Green Deal, was not impressed with the Belgian plan: all Member States of the European Union have subscribed to the Paris climate targets and must make national plans to achieve those targets. And that also applies to Belgium and Flanders (*Alle lidstaten van de Europese Unie hebben de klimaatdoelstellingen van Parijs onderschreven en moeten nationale plannen maken om die doelstellingen te realiseren. En dat geldt ook voor België en Vlaanderen*). In the margins of the climate summit in Madrid, our country was awarded the unenviable Fossil of the Day prize. The prize is awarded by the global network of NGOs, Climate Action Network, to the country that performs worst at the UN Climate Talks. Was the Belgian delegation embarrassed? Not that we could notice.

The end result of the Madrid summit is poor to say the least and comes nowhere near fulfilling the necessary requirements. Apart from the European Union – and even though the European action plan still has to be implemented – no major greenhouse gas emitter has announced a serious plan to achieve carbon dioxide neutrality in 2050. Jean-Pascal Vanyperssele, the respected Belgian climatologist, concludes that what should have been the summit of ambition eventually became the summit of disappointment.

### **Dutch judge, Kees Streefkerk, brings some light into darkness**

In May, the Dutch Supreme Court heard the government's appeal against a lawsuit brought by the Urgenda Foundation, a citizens' climate organisation that in the lower courts has successfully argued that the Dutch government must do more to combat climate change. On Friday, December 20, the Supreme Court of the Netherlands ordered the Dutch government to cut the nation's greenhouse gas emissions by 25 per cent of 1990 levels by the end of 2020. It is the first time a nation has been required by its courts to take action against climate change. *Because of climate change, the lives, well-being and living circumstances of many people around the world, including in the Netherlands are being threatened*, the Chief Justice said in commenting the decision. The decision made by the Supreme Court is final: ... *The Supreme Court decides that the order to the Dutch state, issued by the district court and confirmed by the court of appeal, is definitively upheld...* Given the presence of a large number of foreign attendees, Streefkerk passed judgement in English.

It was a historic moment. Never before had a judge forced a country to pursue a stricter climate policy. Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, did not wish to give any guarantees and preferred to adopt a non-committal attitude and talk about "a decent job in a short time" (*een behoorlijke klus in korte tijd*).

### **Stop the Greta- and Anuna-bashing**

Despite four decades of warnings, far too little has happened to stop global warming. Our greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise; the physical process we ourselves started has gone on undisturbed. Since the beginning of the new millenium, the list of successive heat, drought and flood records has become much too long for us to continue to ignore global warming. Natural disasters were always there, but global warming has made them more frequent and more extreme. We can see its effects everywhere, also in Belgium. More and more tons of sand are being used to protect our coast against rising sea levels. Belgian farmers are having to cope with more and more extreme droughts and downpours that destroy their crops.

Anyone who persists in claiming that we can solve the problem later, that we have the technology and that we should not be so alarmist is unrealistic and unethical [Debusschere 2019].

### **I would have loved to wish you all a happy, care-free New Year**

However, in a world that continues to generate misfortune and disaster, my New Year wishes can only sound a little hollow.

### **References**

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