

Forest peoples key to climate solutions

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Local villagers join a demonstration led by P-Move, a grassroots group which campaigns for land rights for the poor, in February this year. Somchai Poomlard

With Greenland's ice sheet now melting at a rate of up to 4.4 million swimming pools per day, Bangkok could be submerged under water much sooner than we had thought.

That is not the only bad news.

The Arctic permafrost is also rapidly thawing in the glare of the worst global heatwave ever recorded. The melting permafrost is releasing vast amounts of greenhouse gases trapped in the ice for millennia, speeding up global warming.

The planet is on fire. The heat is triggering natural wildfires across the globe, adding to the unstoppable destruction of forestland by governments and big businesses. Even Alaska and Siberia are not spared.

Nearer to home, the massive forest fires in Sumatra are yet again blanketing Malaysia and Singapore in haze. In Thailand, wildfires raging through Nakhon Si Thammarat peat forests are reprising the toxic-haze nightmare suffered across the country earlier this year.

One thing appears certain, things will get worse as global warming intensifies.

But can we turn the tide?

The near-impossibility of the challenge brings to mind a video clip shared widely on social media recently. It shows an orangutan on a toppled tree trunk desperately grappling with a powerful bulldozer that was destroying its forest and home to make way for palm oil plantations in Indonesia. The fight proved futile as the creature fell helplessly to the ground.

The symbolism of a lone orangutan battling a deadly machine in vain was poignant and powerful. But are we any different? Can we, mere individuals, prevent a destructive system run by powerful corporations and corrupt governments from killing our earthly home?

Earth and the humanity it supports are facing their greatest threat in history. Yet we are simply sleepwalking to our demise.

The momentum of decline appears inevitable. Rising sea levels will drown islands and coastal cities, wreaking havoc worldwide. Extreme weather is already bringing droughts, flash floods and fierce storms, plunging people into hardship and poverty as conflicts intensify over water and other resources crucial to livelihoods. The rising temperature will meanwhile bring new diseases that cause further suffering.

The natural world is fast losing its self-regulating balance. The rising temperature is heating the oceans and triggering rapid changes in marine life and ecological systems. A massive loss of biodiversity is already underway, both on land and at sea, as global warming eats into habitats.

The painful thing is we know why all this is happening and even how to undo it. Yet we allow our way of life to be dictated by the fossil fuel industry as we continue to pump greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Equally painful, we know forests are our saviours, yet our governments are still working hand in glove with agro giants to destroy the rainforests just for animal feed and palm oil. We have also failed miserably to question state policies which destroy the environment and crack down on local communities trying to protect their sources of livelihood.

The planet is breaking down. A calamity is almost upon us. But we are still glued to meaningless political theatre day in and out.

The prime minister's oath gaffe and maddening response is our latest concern, but it will soon be replaced by another frustration. How long will the Prayut government last? Will the Future Forward Party be eliminated by the powers-that-be? Will political divisiveness culminate in violence and a repeat of the bloody October 6 massacre?

Will the answers to these questions save us from the looming climate change catastrophe?

We must get our priorities right.

Of course, we need democracy and a new charter. We need to send the military back to barracks. But if we remain mired in militaristic, authoritarian culture and national policies are still dictated by a centralised officialdom, with economic growth coming at a cost to the environment and human rights, democracy is a mere ballot-box ritual and a new charter remains as powerless as its predecessors.

Democracy and decentralisation will be meaningful only when they enable locals to protect and manage their natural resources. That is how democracy and sustainability meet. That's how we will have a chance to survive climate change.

It's also important not to allow the powerful who are bulldozing our earth to put us through a guilt trip. They tell us our addiction to excessive consumerism is to blame. So we buy green products, use public transport and reduce plastic use, to reassure ourselves we are helping the environment.

The fact is, global warming is caused by the environmentally destructive system driven by corporations and backed by state policies. That's where the problems lie. That's what we must tackle.

To avoid global disaster, governments must say no to the fossil fuel lobby, cut greenhouse gases and shift to reusable and clean sources of energy immediately. They must also issue and enforce policies to protect marine life and ecologies.

Forestry is key to mitigating global warming and protecting biodiversity. Encouraging people to plant more trees is good, but insufficient. For a system-wide change, governments must halt their top-down development policies to exploit or destroy forests. Dictatorial forest conservation policies and crackdowns must also end, to be replaced with co-management by indigenous peoples and local communities.

The land rights of indigenous peoples and forest communities must also be recognised, in line with the latest report by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Governments should also tap their knowledge of land stewardship to overcome "the combined challenges of climate change, food security, biodiversity conservation, and combating desertification and land degradation", says the report.

Thailand is doing just the opposite.

Instead of recognising the rights of indigenous people and forest communities, Thailand's draconian forest laws treat them as criminals and subjects them to violent eviction and imprisonment.

At the same time, the government is cutting down forests and handing the land to mining companies, big dams, plantations, and economic zones while turning a blind eye to agro giants that fuel demand from corn plantations in the watershed woodlands.

It pains me to see city people so eager for "green" coffee, cotton bags, and paper straws, but still happy to condemn indigenous peoples and forest dwellers as habitat destroyers.

Forest communities have not given up the fight. Their demands for land rights in exchange for communal protection of forests and biodiversity are in line with the stance of climate scientists around the globe. Yet their proposals are being quashed by new and more draconian forest laws passed under junta rule.

Can these forest guardians fight off the state and corporate machinery that is destroying their natural homes? Time is running out. If they lose, we all lose: The melting Arctic ice may submerge our homes beneath rising seas sooner than we think.

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