



Many of us now realise we face the collapse of our life support systems

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George Monbiot is an iconic environmental writer, conservationist, campaigner and journalist. Speaking to Srijana Mitra Das at Times Evoke, Monbiot discussed the silver linings to the current pandemic — including the opportunities emerging to ‘reset’ our environmental behaviour:

Does the pandemic offer us lessons in terms of the environment?

Yes, one of the lessons it offers us is that people can change their lives when they must do so. So often, we have been told that people would never accept the changes required to prevent the climate breakdown. But the changes we need to make in order to alter environmental outcomes are actually much less severe than the changes we’re making now to prevent the pandemic from spreading. I think this shows that when we are called upon to act for the greater good, the great majority of people are prepared to do that, even if that means bearing a personal cost.

What we as environmental campaigners are calling for is people to carry a much smaller cost — we are not asking people to stay at home or not meet other people. We’re asking them to make much smaller changes, alongside structural changes and changes in technology which will greatly reduce our environmental impacts.



OUR DENUDED LAND: Trees are vital for humanity. The 2019 IPCC Report finds forests are essential to keep global warming under 2°C. Yet, deforestation is rampant (Photo: Getty Images)

Have you seen transformations occurring in people’s thinking about the environment at this time?

What I am seeing is that many people are suddenly realising that this normality which we have constructed in our minds, which might seem to last forever, is actually extremely fragile — if it can be so radically changed by one virus, imagine the changes that can be wrought by the steady collapse of our life support systems, which is what we are facing.

In Britain, we’ve seen people fighting in supermarkets over things like paper rolls. But if, as predicted, climate breakdown severely impacts harvests around the world, these supermarket fights will look very mild in comparison to the potential fights, globally and individually, over food. And many people have begun to think about that.

Despite climate science though, why are some people still clinging to what you write of as 'the illusion of security'?

Well, to accept the threat of environmental change is to accept that so many of the stories we told ourselves, particularly the story about progress, which is often conflated with the idea of economic growth, may not be true. If economic growth, instead of taking us towards general prosperity, drives us to the edge of a cliff, then we must reassess much of our worldview — and that's a painful business. All change is painful but change in response to an existential threat is particularly something we would rather not engage with. People find it easier to deny the science than to accept the implications of it.

WHY FORESTS MATTER

- Forests are part of **humanity's life support systems** — they absorb greenhouse gases, stop soil erosion and limit harmful zoonotic diseases
- **Forests house 80% of land-based animals and birds** — deforestation has endangered the orangutan, the Sumatran rhino, Asian elephants, bonobo great apes, kiwi birds, etc.
- Agriculture, livestock farming, logging and mining cause half the world's deforestation. Since humans began felling trees, 46% of Earth's tree cover has been destroyed. Upto **20% of greenhouse gas emissions annually are due to forest cover loss**
- Solutions include **reforestation, agroforestry and sustainable forest management**, encouraging **plant-based diets**, creating **biodiversity conservation zones** and **forest shelter belts** which sequester carbon

Research: National Geographic, Scientific American, World Wildlife Fund, World Bank

How can we then inspire people to think of what you call 'a great reset' for the environment?

It's important to note that our economies world over are very much in the hands of government policy now — our economies are much more planned than market theorists tell us. So, governments now have an amazing opportunity to, without destabilising anything, start directing industries in a different way. Rather than simply bailing out oil companies, for instance, governments could support them on condition that they move from building oil rigs and gas platforms to offshore wind turbines. This is not unprecedented. When the United States entered the Second World War, for instance, it turned its economy around entirely — suddenly, within a few months, civilian factories were producing fighter jets and amphibious vehicles. That was many years before digitisation and just-in-time production. So, if this could be done then, similar change can occur now, moving things around very quickly to a green economy, instead of just reinflating the old damaging economy.

You've noticed great enthusiasm among individuals for wildlife during the global lockdowns. Are there other positives emerging now?

One very positive aspect has been the flowering of mutual aid — in many communities around the world, people have helped each other to an unprecedented degree. People who can't leave home have relied on volunteers to do their shopping for them, people have created networks to ensure that those isolating don't fall into loneliness, technicians have come together to quickly design new PPEs, etc. We're seeing this wonderful human ability to come together and help each other. We should build on this ability. We must act collectively for the common good. The past few decades have been the age of selfish individualism. Anything which inspires us to break out of this behaviour will help in dealing with the greatest threat we've ever faced — the collapse of our environmental life-support systems. If we can see ourselves as members of communities engaged in mutual aid, then that is something very beneficial emerging from this situation — something we can truly build on towards our transformation.

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