

Life on Earth now under threat as never before

JOHN GIBBONS

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OPINION: Earth is on the cusp of one of the greatest ever die-offs, involving mass extinctions of species

WHEN WE put our mind to it, it's amazing what we can learn to forget. Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 hosted one of the most important international conferences in history, now remembered as the Earth Summit. Some 172 governments were represented in Rio, from all ends of the political spectrum – Fidel Castro and George H Bush were among the 108 heads of state who took part in this groundbreaking environmental congress.

The conference heard a remarkable address from a 12-year-old Canadian girl, Severin Suzuki. She reminded delegates that, as adults, “You teach us how to behave in the world. You teach us not to fight with others, to work things out; to respect others, to clean up our mess. Not to hurt other creatures; to share and not be greedy. Then, why do you go out and do the things you tell us not to do?”

On environmental damage, her message to world leaders was simple: “If you don't know how to fix it, please stop breaking it!” The guilelessness of a child's earnest appeal captured the zeitgeist and helped shape the tone for the 27 Principles of the Rio Declaration, a bold document drawn up to guide humanity onto a sustainable path with the natural systems upon which we depend. Environmental protection was finally to be placed as a key pillar of all future human progress.

Later in 1992, a panel of 1,700 senior scientists issued a public appeal, headlined: “Warning to Humanity”. Humans and the natural world were, they warned, “on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment . . . if not checked, many of our current practices . . . may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life as we know it”.

The world, it seemed, had at last awoken to the severe ecological threats and was prepared to confront them squarely.

Then, as the years passed by, something truly astonishing happened: absolutely nothing. “Men occasionally stumble over the truth,” Winston Churchill once observed, “but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.” Yes, UN institutions were built and treaties signed, but in reality the battle between the forces touting bare-knuckle economic growth and those arguing for planetary stewardship for future generations has been a rout.

What followed instead were two decades of relentless resource plunder, habitat destruction and pollution. This unprecedented evisceration of the rich diversity of life on Earth has been celebrated as an era of record “economic growth”.

So, fast-forward 20 years to 2012. The Rio+20 conference to be held later this month is now just a pared back three-day affair, with little of substance on the agenda and a clear lack of appetite for action, given that growth, at all costs, is being sold as the panacea for our (growth-induced) woes.

A leaked draft agenda for Rio+20 pointed out that: “Unsustainable development has increased the stress on the Earth's limited natural resources and on the carrying capacity of ecosystems. Food insecurity, climate change and biodiversity loss have adversely affected development gains.”

Many of the world's leaders, from Barack Obama to Angela Merkel, are expected to snub the event. Ireland, which yesterday unveiled a pre-Rio document entitled Sustainable Future (long on aspirations, short on binding commitments) is dispatching our accident-prone Minister for the Environment, Phil Hogan, to Brazil.

We may as well have sent Jedward. That at least might have persuaded RTÉ that this event was actually newsworthy. Despite its extensive recent coverage of a song contest in Azerbaijan, the station – which since last year has left vacant the position of environment correspondent – confirmed to me that it has “no plans” to send a reporter to Rio+20, citing budgetary constraints. It is not about budgets, however. It’s about priorities.

So what exactly is at stake? A major paper in the science journal Nature argued that Earth is on the cusp of one of the greatest ever die-offs, involving mass extinctions of species.

“When we kick over into a mass extinction regime, results are extreme, they’re irreversible and they’re unpredictable,” said Dr David Jablonski of the University of Chicago. Prof Stuart Pimm of Duke University added: “We are living in geologically unprecedented times. Only five times in Earth’s history has life been as threatened as it is now.”

The fact that human activities are propelling this extinction event is in no way reassuring. Once you pull the trigger, it is very difficult to stop the bullet. For example, the Greenland ice pack is now losing an average of 250 billion tonnes a year in mass. Beyond a rapidly approaching tipping point, that entire ice sheet is destined to melt over time, and no force on Earth can prevent it.

A large-scale 2009 study from MIT in Chicago projected, in the absence of policies to drastically reduce CO2 emissions, average global temperature increases this century of 5.2C (with a 90 per cent probability range of 3.5-7.4C). These numbers vary in likely impacts from widespread chaos to an epic extinction event sweeping away most living things.

But are there alternative paths? “Economic growth is mistakenly seen as synonymous with wellbeing,” says prime minister of Bhutan Jigmi Thinley. “The faster we cut down forests and haul in fish stocks to extinction, the more GDP grows.” Worldwide, fossil fuel subsidies are worth more than \$400 billion (€320 billion) a year, six times more than global spending on renewable energy. Even to tackle just this perverse incentive to polluters would be a huge step in stabilising the climate system.

Mistaken ideologies and distorted politics make a resolution of our ecological crux all but impossible within the prevailing growth-fixated paradigm. “The current political system is broken,” according to the British government’s chief science adviser, Dr Bob Watson. “Nothing has changed in 20 years, we are not remotely on a course to be sustainable.” In the same 20 years, Ireland’s average temperature has increased by 0.75C, exactly in line with a projected 4C calamity this century.

Tragically, there is little on the table for Rio+20 capable of putting a dent in our trajectory towards global system failure in the coming years and decades. And not only is humanity failing to act, we in Ireland don’t even want to talk about it.

JOHN GIBBONS is an environmental writer and commentator. He is online at Thinkorswim.ie Twitter: @think_or_swim

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