

LEADER 4 December 2017

Environmentalism: mission impossible, or just improbable?

The latest dire warning from scientist could inspire defeatism. But hope and redoubled effort is a better response



Casey Kelbaugh/Redux/NYT/Eyevine

“HUMAN beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about.”

Hazard a guess as to when those words were written. Last month? Or 25 years ago?

The answer is “both”. The *World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity* was originally issued in November 1992, backed by more than 1700 signatories including most of the science Nobel prizewinners alive at the time. It was reissued last month, this time with the backing of 15,364 scientists – and an even blunter message. “Humanity has failed to make sufficient progress in generally solving these foreseen environmental challenges, and alarmingly, most of them are

getting far worse.”

So has nothing really changed? Has 25 years of effort been wasted? Maybe things could have been even worse, but it is clearly not mission accomplished.

Perhaps it was always *Mission: Impossible*. Warnings from experts often fall on deaf ears, or worse are counterproductive. In these febrile, populist times they are easily dismissed as the sanctimonious preaching of an out-of-touch elite. The world appears to be in no mood to listen.

“Despite all the problems, there is remarkable optimism that the message is getting through”

This puts scientists of all kinds – but especially environmental ones – on the horns of a dilemma. Documenting the decline of the biosphere is their day job, and many feel it is their duty to warn the world. But they also know their message will be met by widespread fatigue, cynicism or outright denial.

Meanwhile, the news from the coal face gets worse. Climate change – identified as “especially troubling” in the second warning – appears to be significantly worse than we thought (see “Earth’s climate will warm 15 per cent more than we thought”). Even seemingly innocuous local actions can have global impacts. One of the natural world’s great spectacles, the migration of mammals across Africa, is being killed by fences erected by cattle farmers (see “Wildebeest no more: The death of Africa’s great migrations”).

But despite these problems, there is remarkable and resilient optimism among scientists that their message is getting through. Progress has been made on the ozone layer, on deforestation and on renewable energy. The Paris Agreement is far from perfect but is more ambitious than anyone could have hoped for 25 years ago, says Peter Frumhoff, chief climate scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists. None of this would have been achieved without the drumbeat of evidence-based warnings coming from the world of science.

Admittedly, it is hard to believe that in another 25 years scientists won’t be issuing another warning. Humanity’s problems run deep; our collective ability to tune out news we don’t want to hear is one of them. But if scientists – and science magazines – give up trying to break through, we might as well pack up and go home now.

This article appeared in print under the headline “Don’t drop the ball now”

Magazine issue 3155, published 9 December 2017

