

Let's declare a climate emergency

Many governments, local authorities and agencies have declared a climate emergency; in all by the end of June 2019, some [135 million people](#) have been affected. Indeed, the [UK has become the first country](#) in the world to declare a climate emergency.

This positive worldwide action begs fundamental questions about what this declaration means and whether it will lead to new responses and interventions in policies, plans, projects and programmes and then how such an emergency will inform key planning and resource management decisions. The context to this is important as whilst many [people are concerned about climate change](#), there is a reluctance to pay more to take action against it. This reinforces a wider view that the environment imposes a constraint on development or economic growth and thus becomes politically volatile with voters as France recently discovered under [President Macron climate change levies](#).

Furthermore, the term “emergency” conveys a need to act immediately before the current situation worsens leading to increased disaster. Thus the declaration of climate emergency surely needs some new emergency plan or guidance that changes the way we do things otherwise this could easily be seen as a nothing more than a PR stunt associated with [“greenwash”](#) and preserving the status quo within a politically impotent “paper tiger”.

As a knowledge exchange fellow charged with communicating science into policy and decision-making communities including the general public, I remain somewhat sceptical of the value of negative terms such as crisis, emergency or disaster which are used to excess in the media and policy debates. The effect is to dilute the meaning of the words. Furthermore, climate change is also not that visible to most people, notwithstanding those who have suffered flooding, drought and catastrophic storms. This further erodes the idea of an emergency particularly where people may have to pay for this upfront.

As an academic working to improve the [mainstreaming](#) of nature in policy and decision making I am convinced that language matters and we urgently need to frame climate change differently in terms of an opportunity, pragmatically using the present climate emergency as a powerful political hook upon which to build [nature based solutions](#) highlighting the value of green infrastructure and natural capital which cumulatively can generate significant societal and economic benefits.

It is also important here that we do not put the climate emergency in its own little silo; rather we need also to understand that the climate emergency is symptomatic of a wider planetary problem where a [recent \(2019\) global IPBES assessment of biodiversity](#) alerted us to “unprecedented species’ extinction rates and increased global social and humanitarian crises associated with war, famine, and inequality provide another reminder of the way these issues are all linked together. Thus, to try and deal with one in isolation is highly problematic.

So, what should be the response of policy makers and the public?

The climate emergency needs us to look fundamentally at the way we make decisions over the future use and development of land. Moving away from the fetish for economic growth we need to look at the kind of planning systems we need that to [regulate the use and development of land in the public interest and to deliver sustainable development](#) (see paragraph 7). Within the UK there is concern over the direction of planning policy and practice with the recent [Raynsford Review](#) scathing in its attack on English planning not being fit for purpose

In my view we already have part of the answer in that many governments, including the UK have signed up the [UN Sustainable Development](#) goals which commit governments to actions across all 17 goals with clear indicators to measure progress. Indeed the UK launched a [234 page review of progress against these goals in June 2019](#) highlighting a generally positive outcome but with areas for significant improvement. I am not sure how well this accords with the declaration of a climate emergency however.

What we do need is evidence of innovative policies and tools that can help engineer effective responses.

Recent research has highlighted the potential value of large scale [tree planting](#) in terms of carbon reduction, but trees also deliver other [ecosystem services](#) such as timber, biodiversity, pollination, recreation and air quality. These benefits can be costed via [natural capital accounting](#) and with recent revisions to [HM Treasury Green Book \(2019\)](#) this has enabled nature to be transformed from a constraint to a net asset. Recent research has shown the value that green spaces deliver to the economy in terms of these benefit; e.g. [London's Parks £91 Billion](#); [Great Barrier Reef £56 Billion](#). Whilst such figures are crude and often hide more than reveal, they do bring into sharp focus their societal value.

We therefore need to see such benefits being explicitly recognised in planning policies that can help us make better planning decisions for the long term. For example, South Downs have a core policy as one of four that all other policies need to be subservient to. To support this plan the South Downs have produced guidance for [developers](#) and [householders](#) in how to generate multiple benefits from developments.

Draft Core Policy SD2: Ecosystems Services SDNP 2015 Local Plan Preferred Options document

1. Proposals that deliver sustainable development and comply with other relevant policies will be permitted provided that they do not have an unacceptable adverse impact on the natural environment and its ability to contribute goods and services. Proposals will be expected, as appropriate, to:

- a. provide more and better joined up natural habitats;*
- b. conserve water resources;*
- c. sustainably manage land and water environments;*
- d. improve the National Park's resilience to, and mitigation of, climate change;*
- e. increase the ability to store carbon through new planting or other means;*
- f. conserve and improve soils;*
- g. reduce pollution;*
- h. mitigate the risk of flooding;*
- i. improve opportunities for peoples' health and wellbeing;*
- j. stimulate sustainable economic activity; and*
- k. deliver high-quality sustainable design*

This policy is significant as it elevates the environment as expressed through the ecosystem services it delivers it to a dominant level. It is also integrative in that it seeks to generate benefits from multiple ecosystem services as defined in a-k options. The wording of the policy and the associated guidance helps make the policy seen as an opportunity rather than a constraint.

There are also other ways outside the planning system that public can make a difference themselves. Research has shown the value of our gardens as part of the green infrastructure network which crosses our towns and cities. All too often we pave over our front gardens for a car park and lose valuable greenspace at the back through decking and other urban infrastructure. Both projects in [Manchester](#) and [Sheffield](#) have looked at the contribution of gardens and this serves notice that the public can do much more in their own decisions.

The take home message is that the declaration of a climate emergency needs an effective and planned response with action and change at all levels. In so doing we need to address economic, social and environmental agendas together. Building better places for the future and reinvesting in nature for me is a good way to start.