***Sharing the High Seas, Flooding and Water Shortages – Action Required!***

***International***

1. The UN has agreed an historic treaty to protect life in the “high seas” – the **Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ**) agreement. The treaty applies to the ocean lying more than 200 nautical miles from coastlines, including the seabed and the air space above. Under international law, the high seas are shared by all nations, with equal rights to navigate, fish and conduct scientific research but only a small number of states have so far taken advantage of these opportunities. The new agreement will help more countries get involved by creating rules for more fairly sharing the rewards from new fields of scientific discovery and assisting developing countries with research funding and the transfer of technology. [[1]](#footnote-1)
2. As with all UN agreements, states have to ratify it following which it will be possible to establish **marine protected areas** (MPAs) in locations of special value, such as the Sargasso Sea: a refuge of floating seaweed bounded by ocean currents which offers breeding habitat for countless rare species. However, while this protection of biodiversity has been welcomed by conservation groups the proof of its success will be in implementation. History is not encouraging: the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1982 agreed to set up an International Seabed Authority which was not established until 1994, and has still not established a mining code or a sharing mechanism.
3. Meanwhile, on land, there have been more examples of floods and landslides, this time in Brazil, while New Zealand has been hard it by a cyclone. As the climate heats, scientists agree that extreme weather events – including **flooding and cyclones** – will happen more frequently, and with greater intensity. People who live in areas prone to flooding will need to consider “managed retreat”. This concept is also being raised in relation to coastal settlements, even in the UK – see last week’s Countryfile in Norfolk!
4. While these weather events relate to global climate change, in some areas water shortages and flooding are exacerbated by the way in which humans have developed their surroundings. An example was given of Los Angeles which experiences record breaking rainfall, floods and then **water shortages** because of the way in which the concrete gutters send rainwater straight out into the ocean rather than storing it for future use.[[2]](#footnote-2) Joni Mitchell was right!
5. Larry Elliott in the Guardian has recently argued that the World Bank and other institutions set up in 1944 are no longer fit for purpose, and that ideally **“*there would be a new multilateral bank dedicated to climate finance and energy transitions,*** *with an international debt authority that would replace the current inadequate framework for dealing with sovereign indebtedness”.* In the meantime, replacing the current head of the World Bank with a candidate committed to sustainable development goals is necessary, with Mia Mottley, the prime minister of Barbados who was responsible for the Bridgetown initiative, as a positive candidate. [[3]](#footnote-3)

***National***

1. In the UK, as in other countries, governments are having to balance action to address net zero with immediate issues such as energy prices and shortages of food products. Dutch farmers have been protesting at the actions being taken to halve the country’s overall nitrogen emissions by 2030 – most of which are generated by the manure and urine produced by more than 100m cattle, pigs and chickens. British **farmers** have been encouraged by the government’s plans but continue to have concerns about production and pricing, with criticism of all the major supermarkets for refusing to recognise the costs of sustainable production of both livestock and vegetables.
2. Meanwhile, **builders** have been warning the government that “anti-business” planning rules, including “over-strict enforcement of environmental regulations” may contribute to the huge shortfall in new housing. However, a report commissioned by the National Trust, Historic England and property organisations including Peabody and Grosvenor has said that **retrofitting** Britain’s historic buildings could generate £35bn of economic output a year, create new jobs and play a crucial role in achieving climate targets. [[4]](#footnote-4) The head of the UK’s Climate Change Committee, Chris Stark, has recently told the BBC that the government policy on **insulation** is very poor. Two-thirds of homes or 19 million need better insulation, according to government data, but it is expensive to retrofit and people he thinks the government needs to provide greater incentives for people to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. In addition to the cost, there needs to be the installers to do the work.[[5]](#footnote-5)
3. Ed Miliband has indicated at a Labour and the City event that there is a “*massive economic opportunity for this country… to work together on the green transition*”, although it is likely that both his audience, and a wider population, may view this with some scepticism. At a recent speech at Chatham House, David Lammy MP included the following commitments in relation to green growth: “*…our £28 billion* ***Green Prosperity Plan*** *will help our many strengths such as our position as a world leader in wind power and our renewable research base to build political, scientific and commercial alliances to grow prosperity in the UK and make Britain’s prosperity more resilient… As the transition from fossil fuels accelerates, dramatic industrial shifts are creating new demand for technology critical materials like cobalt and lithium. Labour will push for climate action to become a fourth pillar at the UN… and will argue for the creation of a new law of ecocide to prosecute the widespread and intentional destruction of the planet… we will build a clean power alliance, an ‘Inverse OPEC’ of developed and developing nations committed to 100% clean power by 2030.*
4. Councils across the country are facing the challenge of persuading communities that clean air is worth some reduction in car and van use – Sheffield, Newcastle and Gateshead have all recently introduced **Clean Air Zones**. Sheffield hopes to tackle the estimated 500 deaths a year ascribed to pollution which is currently exceeding legal limits. Other cities with CAZ are Bath, Birmingham, Bradford, Bristol and Portsmouth, while Manchester has abandoned plans in the face of fierce opposition. The far right, libertarians and conspiracy theorists are using the issue of low-traffic neighbourhoods to get support for their battle against the “international socialist concept”[[6]](#footnote-6) of 15 minute cities. People opposing LTNs may have legitimate concerns about the lack of amenities exacerbated by austerity but the far right are using media to frighten people with nonsense about locking people into their neighbourhoods.[[7]](#footnote-7) Councils introducing this will need to address the inequalities in their areas as part of persuading people of the approach.
5. Wood-burning stoves are still in the headlines, and under discussion by the parliamentary Environmental Audit Committee. Apparently two-thirds of Londoners back a ban on wood burners in homes, which are the single biggest source of tiny air pollution particles in Britain. London’s new air pollution limits mean that wood burners will be banned in new and refurbished homes.

***Local***

1. Locally there is also concern about tracking air pollution on the Underground. The CNJ is featuring a monthly column from **The Camden Clean Air Initiative**[[8]](#footnote-8) who have been monitoring air quality in the borough. As part of this they have identified that the Northern Line is one of the most polluted lines on the network. TfL are also monitoring and taking action to reduce dust on the tube.
2. **Thames Water** continues to be a challenge in relation to upgrading the infrastructure to prevent future leaks and floods – the company was summoned before Camden Council’s Environment Scrutiny Committee and tried to explain the work they are doing to improve the network, denying that they were making bit profits rather than investing in the service. Separately, thousands of people have signed a petition against proposals by Thames Water to pump treated sewage into the Thames. The organisation is currently the subject of an investigation by the regulator OfWat into what it says are “shocking” failures in the way most water firms run their waste treatment works. (Check out Paul Whitehouse: Our Troubled Rivers [[9]](#footnote-9)). There is a protest against Dirty Water in Parliament Square on 13th March.
3. There is continuing concern about the felling of trees, particularly in relation to HS2 – along the Euston Road and Euston Square Gardens – surely an area where we need every bit of green canopy we can get! West Hampstead Neighbourhood Forum and other local campaigners are still objecting to Landsec’s plans for the O2 site while Hampstead Neighbourhood Forum are looking for stronger plans for biodiversity by preserving gardens and trees, noting that the Environment Act 2021 says that all planning permissions from November 2023 must deliver a 10% net gain in biodiversity plant and animal life. Camden is also currently inviting comments on Camden Green Space Maintenance through Commonplace.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Action on the Environment**

1. There has been considerable coverage of environmental activism in recent weeks, with Extinction Rebellion (XR) “temporarily shifting away from public disruption as a primary tactic”, while Just Stop Oil and Insulate Britain continue to undertake direct civil resistance. We were already aware of the Government’s new legislation restricting the right to protest but I think many of us were shocked when we heard that **climate protesters** were refused the right to give a defence explaining their motives for their disruptive actions. What such actions have done is to get media coverage of environmental issues and raise consciousness of the Government’s failure to deliver on its promises in relation to the climate crisis. As previously reported, the UK Climate Change Committee has been clear that the current strategy will not deliver net zero by 2050, as legally required. [[11]](#footnote-11)
2. A reminder: XR are organising a peaceful, family friendly multi-day action – **The Big One[[12]](#footnote-12) -** from the 21st – 24th April 2023 outside the Houses of Parliament. There will be a Camden crowd walking down from Parliament Hill to Parliament Square on one of those days; please join us (either all the way or for part of the walk or at the Square). Contact me for details.

**Postscript**

A few random positives to take away:

1. Black Mountains College in Brecon is a new institution dedicated to adapting to the climate emergency, offering a degree course BA Hons in Sustainable Futures: Arts, Ecology and System Change. The course will create climate literate change makers for the organisations of the future.[[13]](#footnote-13) Check it out!
2. In early February there was Green Football Weekend, a slow beginning for football to take seriously the climate issue. More serious for lower league clubs, the weather has had a bad impact on pitches and Swindon Town are doing something about it. They are redeveloping their ground with an environmental focus, with a new roof fitted with solar panels and electric charging points in the car park and the appointment of a Chief Sustainability Officer. [[14]](#footnote-14)

**And Finally**

1. Did you know that environmental changes have been having an impact on world history since time began. Apparently, one of the key factors in the fall of Cleopatra was the massive eruption of the Okmok volcano in Alaska in 43BC which led to feeble sunlight and crop shortfalls, and famine, migration, inflation and land abandonment. And increasingly information from archeological digs or satellite images are providing us with evidence of what has gone before, while history tells us what impact it had.[[15]](#footnote-15) Check it out!

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1. <https://theconversation.com/the-high-seas-are-supposed-to-belong-to-everyone-a-new-un-treaty-aims-to-make-it-law> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/feb/27/parched-eco-architecture-los-angeles-megadrought-water-capturing-parks> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/feb/19/its-high-time-to-rethink-how-the-world-bank-operates> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/mar/06/retrofitting-old-buildings-uk-energy-efficiency> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/uk-action-on-climate-change/progress-snapshot/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Conservative MP Nick Fletcher in Parliament [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.bigissue.com/news/environment/15-minute-cities-20-minute-neighbourhood-oxford-paris-melbourne-copenhagen-explained/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://camdencleanair.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.whattowatch.com/watching-guides/paul-whitehouse-our-troubled-rivers-release-date-whats-shown-and-all-about-the-series-about-the-shocking-sewage-scandal> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://camdengreenspacemaintenance.commonplace.is/?utm_campaign=NewCommonplaces03_03_2023&utm_source=cp-email&utm_medium=email> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Interestingly, apparently last month the Prime Minister told the House of Commons that the Labour Party is being “bankrolled” by the protest group Just Stop Oil, an accusation for which Full Fact found no evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-big-one/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://blackmountainscollege.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://www.efl.com/news/2023/february/swindon-town-appoint-former-player-michael-doughty-as-chief-sustainability-officer/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The Earth Transformed, Peter Frankopan, Rarewaves, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)