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Climate Crisis

Viewing climate change through a local lens limits the view

Recent studies underlining the urgency of the threat of global climate change have prompted almost no discussion in the Irish media

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The ice calving front of the Russel Glacier in Kangerlussuaq, Greenland. Photograph: Alfred Wegener Institute

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Over the past few weeks, several studies were published that provide new evidence of the urgency of the threat of global climate change. There was almost no discussion of any of these studies in the Irish media – instead, a great many journalists, both broadsheet and tabloid, chose to ignore the findings.

In early May, a [major new international study](#) suggested that the Arctic could be almost entirely free of sea ice in the summer of 2030, more than a decade earlier than previously thought. The main reason for this revised prediction was the consideration of positive feedback effects, such as a reduction in the reflection of heat from the earth into space as the volume of polar ice decreases.

It has been known for some time that global warming will affect the poles more severely than other parts of the Earth, but the melting of sea ice on such a large scale would be a very serious development as it would release large amounts of cold water into the North Atlantic, causing major changes in ocean current circulation.

More generally, a [study in Nature](#) by a highly respected team of scientists found that the earth has already exceeded safe limits for human habitation as temperature rise, water system disruption and the destruction of natural habitats have all breached safe boundaries. This study, from the Earth Commission, marked an unusual attempt by experts to identify the limits beyond which humans will suffer significant harm, from lack of access to clean water to lower food security, from loss of work due to flooding to large-scale migration caused by persistent drought.

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Thirdly, the most recent studies of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere found that the concentration of carbon dioxide continues to rise inexorably, reaching an all-time high of 423.4 parts per million (ppm) in April 2023. This figure is very high in comparison with that of pre-industrial times (180 ppm) and represents a concentration of heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere not evident for millions of years. As an excess of atmospheric greenhouse gases is the main driver of global warming, there is little question that this will have profound consequences for global climate.

In the longer term, the increased desertification of many of the hottest regions of the world could render some countries uninhabitable, leading to wide-scale migration on an unprecedented scale

None of the above studies received much attention in the national media, despite their obvious importance for the future. One reason for this is a marked tendency in the Irish media to view the issue of global warming through a local lens, with much emphasis on the possible effects of climate change on our own country. This seems to me to be entirely the wrong approach. In the first instance, the scientific uncertainties become very large when one tries to predict how climate change will affect small regions such as Ireland. More importantly, the manifestations of an unstable climate around the world will likely have profound consequences for all nations.

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In the short term we can expect an increase in the frequency of extreme weather events, from destructive wildfires to devastating floods. In the longer term the increased desertification of many of the hottest regions of the world could render some countries uninhabitable, leading to wide-scale migration on an unprecedented scale. This is the real danger of climate change and it is important not to lose sight of this larger picture in media discussions.

Indeed, I was struck by a number of recent newspaper articles extolling the benefits of warmer summers in Ireland due to climate change. It seems to me that such pieces also make the classic error of conflating weather with climate. In fact, there is nothing unusual about a spell of sunny weather in this country in the months of May and June.

It is of course possible that, as the world gradually warms, Ireland and the UK could see warmer and drier summers for some years. However, one can link such weather patterns with a changing global climate only if they persist for many years.

In any case, warmer summers in our own locality will be of little comfort if climate instability becomes the norm globally. From extreme weather events to sea level rise, from the desertification of arable land to large-scale migration, there are few upsides to global warming. Instead, it is a global threat that needs to be addressed with great urgency.

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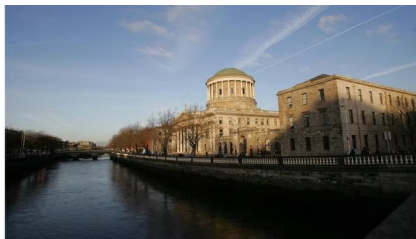
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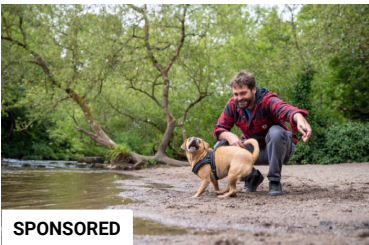
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