



Can history help halt the runaway train?

Is it possible to use the lessons of the past to combat the acceleration of global warming? Dr Mark Levene, a leading climate change activist, and other historians and archaeologists give their views to **Gail Dixon**

Dr Mark Levene:

“The philosophy of history has to change”

CLIMATE CHANGE has become the issue of current times, so I want to stress that this is something we can't ignore. I feel that we are sleepwalking towards an abyss.

I see a schizophrenia in society today: there's so much discussion regarding climate change but what we do is in direct contradiction to what science is telling us, and that goes right across the board to include academics. We as a group are as guilty as any other section of society of not responding as we should do.

The group Rescue! History has been formed to bring together people who are interested in combating climate change, including historians, teachers and researchers. Anyone who is interested in climate change can take part in our conference this month (see 'Journeys' on page 38).

There are various examples from history that show mankind adapting to scarcity or adversity (Jared Diamond presents many in his book *Collapse*). On

the North American continent, when you had peoples coming in from Eurasia at the end of the Ice Age, the evidence is that they encountered an environment rich in animal life and they wiped everything out rapidly. History demonstrates that these peoples had to adapt to being more in tune with their environment in order to survive.

Lent is a positive example of adaptation in our own environment. In the past we lived in relation to the natural world and had to think about what was available across the year. Many people died in May because stores from the previous season had been depleted. Lent was a religiously sanctioned conscious environmental effort to get people to eat less so that they conserved food and were strong enough in spring and summer to be able to plough and continue the cycle. Here you have a measure of restraint that enabled generations to reduce their impact on their environment so that the population could survive.

Science says that if we go on like we are we're finished. That tells me as a historian that, if we're coming to an end, we have to start rereading history in an entirely different way. When people study history they assume that they can retreat from its problems into the future. But if there is no future, you have to start thinking about how we arrived at this point. What's more, the fundamental issues that make history are not kings, queens and politicians, they are environmental issues and how we relate to everything around us. The philosophy of history has to change.

History can help by telling us about the process of how we arrived at this calamitous state. We live in a society that operates in a framework of economic growth and that is moving towards ever-greater globalisation. That process is killing us.

Climate change can be traced directly alongside the process of global development. In fact, carbon concentrations in the atmosphere



Dr Mark Levene lectures in history at Southampton University and is a founder member of the group Rescue! History



Carbon concentrations in the atmosphere started rising around the time of the Industrial Revolution – with, say historians, worrying consequences for the future of the planet

Dr Spencer Weart: “ History tells of mankind’s response to threat ”

SOME PEOPLE think the climate change problem is so overwhelming that nothing effective can be done. Exposing them to the history of how people have responded to difficult problems should inspire them to a more hopeful view. It’s not so much responses to scarcity and adversity that we should be looking at but responses to the very greatest ‘security’ threats and moral failings.

Holding climate change to a minimum, and adapting to the changes that it triggers, will be a challenge comparable to vanquishing fascism, communism and slavery... although in fact it can be done with a lot less expense and loss of life. Perhaps it’s more comparable to the victories over smallpox and prevention of nuclear war, which have relied on limited funds and international cooperation. Historians can show how all these problems originally seemed horribly insurmountable, but were solved, or at least held at bay, once people got to work. ●



Dr Spencer Weart is director of the Center for History of Physics, American Institute of Physics, Maryland, US

Professor Peter Coates: “ History publicises humanity’s follies ”

ALL ENVIRONMENTAL historians are engaged in missionary work to a greater or lesser degree. I hope that by publicising humanity’s past follies, greed and short-sightedness – as well as strategies for survival and examples of more enlightened thinking and behaviour – we historians can make a difference. (Not that I measure the success of an environmental history course by the number of students who sign up for Greenpeace!)

Applying what history teaches us to the future has been one of the strongest selling points for why we should study environmental history

and why the subject should be more firmly embedded in history curricula. But the historian in me is less confident, and I’m inclined to fall in line, reluctantly, with the gloomy conclusion of German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Hegel that the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history. ●

Peter Coates is professor of American and environmental history at the University of Bristol



started to increase around the time of the Industrial Revolution whereas they were stable before.

We have to consider how we can change the parameters of future history, and that must take us away from globalisation. Governments recognise the problem but they don’t know how to get out of it because they’re committed to globalisation. There have been arguments about globalisation going back to the dawn of history but this current global trend has little

relationship to people on the ground. It’s driven by stock exchanges, market forces, hedge funds and derivatives, and all of those things are relatively new.

How we move away from that historical process – and how we do it without killing each other – is the really challenging thing. We need to try something new so that we leave our children and grandchildren an environment that they can inhabit. At the moment we’re living beyond the carrying capacity of the planet. ●

Dr Penny Roberts: “ We are in a better situation now to deal with natural disaster ”

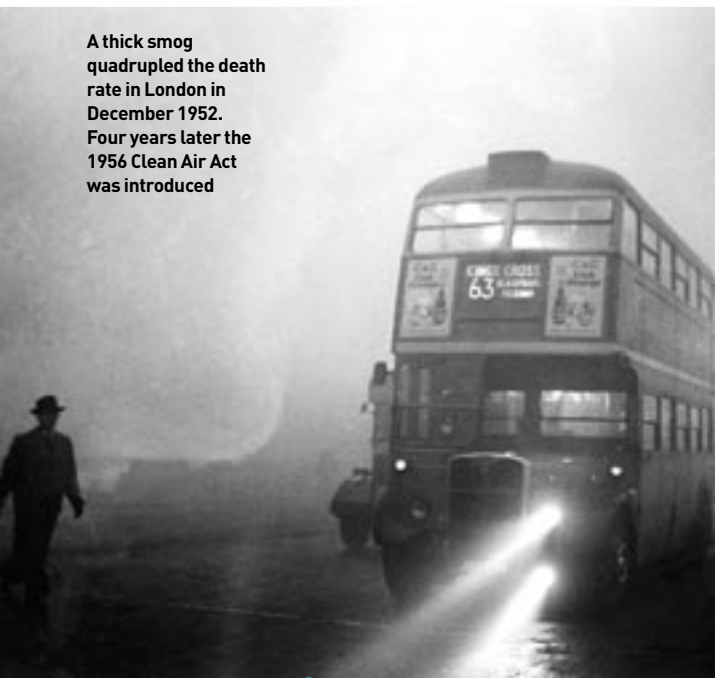
URBAN AND rural communities in the pre-industrial past were faced with natural disasters on a regular basis, and had to find strategies to explain and to cope with them. Above all, the hand of God was believed to be at work, punishing society for its sinfulness. Moral repentance and regeneration were advocated, but more practical measures were also taken. While incidents of flood, famine, fire and plague were familiar visitors, modest fluctuations in temperature over a sustained period (for instance at the beginning of the 14th and 17th centuries) caused widespread problems. Cold winters and wet summers ruined the crops on which the population depended, rendering them more susceptible to disease and death.

Yet for those who survived, demographic decline often preceded more prosperous and beneficial times. Such an account might seem to suggest that such ‘crises’ are natural and manageable, but today we are faced with a quite unprecedented situation. We are now more than ever responsible for the disaster that faces us, but perhaps we are therefore in a better position to do something about it. Collective action may be the solution. Even away from the more apocalyptic scenarios, the dwindling of the world’s resources may return us, if not to a pre-industrial existence, then to a more localised economy. Where we are headed only time will tell. ●

Dr Penny Roberts is senior lecturer in the department of history at the University of Warwick where she teaches late medieval and early modern European history



A thick smog quadrupled the death rate in London in December 1952. Four years later the 1956 Clean Air Act was introduced



Dr Malcolm Chase: “Those who fail to learn from history... repeat its mistakes”

get-out clauses and gave no official body the task of enforcing it. Not surprisingly it was a dead duck.

Both the 1848 and 1875 Public Health Acts gave local authorities power to prosecute polluters. Take up was indifferent, mostly because of a general feeling that smoke was a price paid for prosperity. “If there is one thing more than another that Middlesbrough can be said to be proud of, it is smoke,” the town’s mayor told the Prince of Wales in 1887. “The smoke is an indication of plenty of work, prosperous times, that all classes of work people are being employed and that there is little necessity for charity.” The crowd cheered wildly as he said this.

By the Edwardian period, the work of Julius Cohen at the University of Leeds revealed that 200 grams of solid smoke particles dropped every year on to each square metre of central Leeds. But the biggest polluter was domestic heating and public opinion was a massive obstacle to effective intervention. Councils in Manchester and Coventry showed the way by establishing smokeless zones in the

late 1940s. Then, in December 1952, the sun in the Home Counties was completely obliterated by thick smog for four days. London was thrown into a permanent sub-zero night which quadrupled the death rate. Only then did the public and political will decisively change. The 1956 Clean Air Act achieved in just two decades what over a century of earlier legislation had failed to solve.

History suggests that self-interest and apathy are fundamental obstacles to effective environmental action, that scientific research is usually cheerfully disregarded, and that it will take a major disaster to secure a decisive response. Not an encouraging prospect, is it? ●

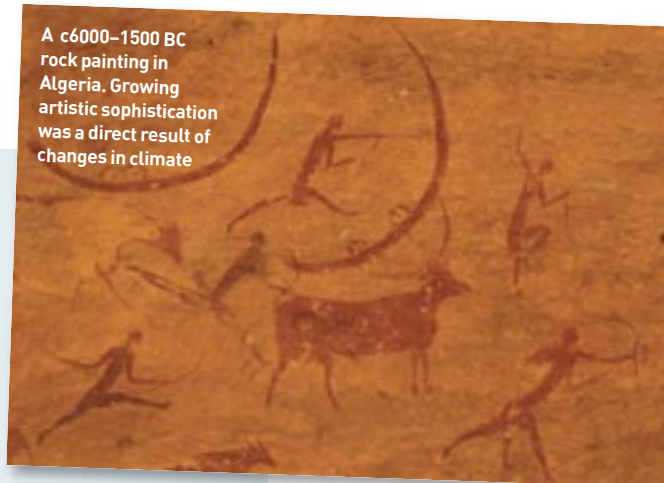


Dr Malcolm Chase is reader in history at the University of Leeds. His most recent book is *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester University Press, 2007)

THERE’S AN old adage that those who fail to learn from history are destined to repeat its mistakes. Thinking about global warning from the perspective of an historian suggests that the human race is in for a very uncomfortable time.

Take, for example, Britain’s record on tackling smoke pollution. Early commentators on the Industrial Revolution were quick to highlight it. A Smoke Prohibition Act was passed as early as 1821, but it was riddled with

A c6000–1500 BC rock painting in Algeria. Growing artistic sophistication was a direct result of changes in climate



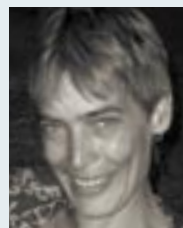
Dr Kate Prendergast: “We are a highly resilient species”

CLIMATE CHANGE was one of the most important influences on our prehistoric ancestors’ capacities to adapt and develop. Our evolution as a modern species took place during a period when the global climate system oscillated from cold glacial to warmer inter-glacial conditions. Prehistoric peoples faced temperatures as much as ten degrees celsius lower than today’s and at the end of the last ice age, saw them rise by seven degrees celsius in 50 years.

Such shifts had a huge impact on resource availability. The ability to respond was a defining feature of our strategies to survive and prosper. In the stresses caused by variations between glacial conditions and more temperate climates, pre-modern humans such as Neanderthals tended to retreat to niche

environments. In contrast, modern humans were able to colonise the world. By taking advantage of the large game roaming the Eurasian tundra, our hunter-gatherer ancestors took real leaps forward in social complexity, art production and mastery of the landscape. Similarly, the end of the ice age triggered another great human leap forward: the beginnings of agriculture.

This evidence clearly shows we are a highly resilient species, able to survive almost anything. However, successful adaptations to climate change in prehistory were based on a deep respect for nature and its awesome power to give and take away. We need to rekindle a similar respect if man-made climate change is not to get the better of those very capacities the changing weather helped to create. ●



Dr Kate Prendergast lectures in archaeology at the University of Oxford. She is currently writing a book on the Neolithic rock art of southern England

JOURNEYS

CONFERENCE

Rescue! History is holding a conference **An End to History? Climate Change, the Past and the Future** on 3 and 4 April at Birmingham and Midland Institute, Birmingham. For more information, please contact [endo@historyconference](mailto:endo@historyconference.org) [@googlemail.com](mailto:endo@historyconference.org)