

Opinion

A climatic warning from history

Chris Callow (far right) and **Jean-Francois Mouhot**, organisers of the recent Rescue!History conference on climate change, explain how the past can help us confront the dramatic environmental challenges of the present



Lessons from the ozone layer

You don't have to look very far into the past to find an example of how failing to act on a man-made environmental challenge can have serious consequences for mankind. Scientific research from before the Second World War showed convincingly that there was a growing hole in the ozone layer, with its many dangers including skin cancers caused by ultra-violet radiation. Yet it took decades for the world to act – a delay that cost billions of dollars and many lives.

Eventually, a successful solution was found and harmful CFCs were banned. However, the Montreal Protocol of the late Eighties (which phased out the production of substances deemed responsible for ozone depletion) was only then signed because the ozone hole was widening above wealthy countries. By contrast, climate change is today having the greatest impact on the world's poorest nations. We cannot afford to be so slow in reacting to this all-consuming threat. Unless we learn from the ozone problem and act now, the impact of accelerating greenhouse gas emissions will be catastrophic.

When Churchill turned a crisis into an advantage

Dramatic crises can bring solutions in their wake. Environmental campaigners often cite the example of the way Britain successfully introduced food rationing during the Second World War as a model for carbon rationing.

Winston Churchill sent out a clear message about the immediate need for rationing but it took a severe threat to people's way of life to get them to accept such changes. And a severe threat to our way of life is what we are facing today. Carbon rationing could work too if people were aware of the urgency of the problem and if rationing was fairly and

universally enforced. And, just as the nutritional health of Britain's population actually improved during the Second World War, carbon rationing would get people out of cars and onto their feet or bicycles.

The sad demise of the Norse colonists

Historical and archaeological research has provided examples of what happens when communities fail to adapt to changes in their environment, most obviously popularised in Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (Allen Lane, 2005). For example, the Norse colonists of Greenland never modified their farming practices in response to the cooling climate and were wiped out. This is a brutal example of humans

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reacting too slowly to the environment around them. The Norse colonists probably thought they had things under control – until it was too late.

We might not be so lucky as our predecessors

Some past populations actually benefited from rising sea levels (which was one of the most obvious results of

global warming), yet that doesn't mean we will do so today. The medieval people of Essex and Kent progressively reclaimed marshland around the Thames estuary, but then failed to maintain the flood defences. The resultant flooding of the land allowed some people to profit by building new fishing weirs – so, for them, there was a plus side to the encroaching seas. However, modern-day northern Europeans will enjoy no such advantages because we have all but exhausted fish supplies.

We can't hide behind wealth and technology

History cannot predict the future for, thankfully, the future is not written. But it does offer the opportunity to pause and think. And it should serve as a warning to those who believe our civilisation is safe today behind its wealth, weapons and technology.

However, as Second World War rationing proved, the past offers more positive instances of dramatic changes successfully undertaken by societies confronted by severe social or moral problems. For example, the slave trade was abolished when people became convinced of the evil of the system – even though abolition was enormously costly to the British economy.

History tells us then that we can reduce the impact of climate change – even use it to our advantage – if we act now. If, by contrast, we turn a blind eye to it and imagine that the environment will somehow take care of itself, we certainly won't be able to look our children in the eye in the future. **II**

Chris Callow (lecturer) and **Jean-Francois Mouhot** (research fellow) teach at the University of Birmingham. This piece builds on papers given at the Rescue!History conference by Jim Galloway and Jan Oosthoek. For more on the group, visit www.rescue-history.org.uk

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