



It's not all doom and gloom

In January I discovered a new book by Oxford University scientist Hannah Ritchie call '*Not the end of the World*' in which she shows that we are making progress towards cutting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and fighting climate change. At university, she discovered the work of the late Swedish statistician Hans Rosling who showed that life was getting better for most people around the world. He created special software that animated data trends to show exactly what was happening [*search for his TED talks on YouTube – they are enthralling and eye-opening*].

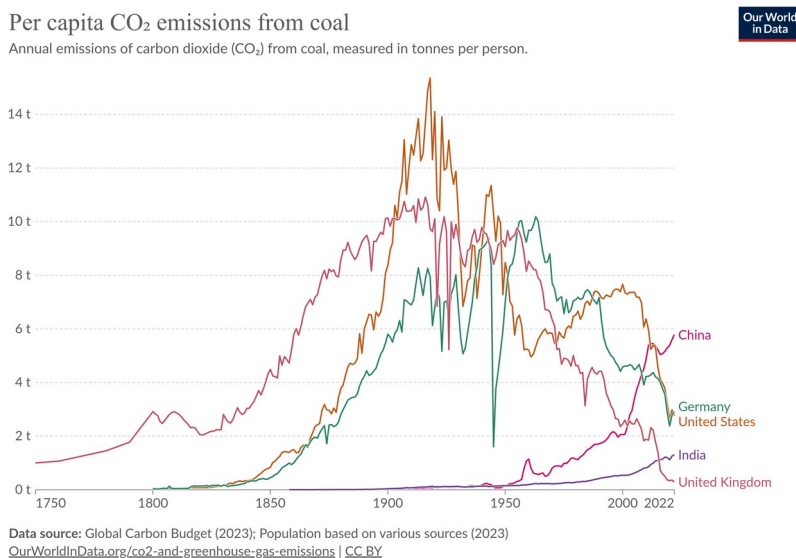
In her book, Ritchie looks at the world from many different aspects, including sustainability, air pollution, climate change, deforestation, food, biodiversity loss, ocean plastic waste and over-fishing. In each, she explains that whilst things are not good, the data indicates we are going in the right direction, albeit not fast enough. She believes there is hope that the world will sort things out before disaster happens. It's not all 'doom and gloom', we shouldn't get too depressed about the future but be optimistic that we can deal with these problems. We have the data, we have the solutions; what's need is the will and effort to continue to push forward.

Ritchie refers back to one of the first formal attempts to define sustainability in the 1987 report *Our Common Future* [from 1983 UN Commission on the Environment and Development, known as the 'Brundtland Commission' after the Norwegian former Prime Minister who chaired it]. Briefly, the definition of sustainability is... "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Ritchie contends that humans have never used resources in a 'sustainable' way. Over thousands of years, we have exploited the world, taking from it and not thinking of the consequences. Historically, the impact has been relatively small because communities were small. We have nibbled away at everything until now we seem to be heading for a crisis. For example, across Europe, including the UK, we have cut down almost all native forests, which has had a major effect on biodiversity. Much of the wood has been burned with the result that we have released tonnes of CO₂ into the atmosphere.

There is good news, however. Globally, child mortality is much, much lower across the world, amounting to less than 4% of births. Not good but in 1800, 43% of children died before reaching five. Similarly, mothers' death from pregnancy has transformed from about 1 in 30 in the 19th century to less than 1 in 10,000 in many countries. Life expectancy has increased everywhere such that in most places people reach the age of 70. More people have access to clean water, sanitation and energy. Even in the lowest income countries 64% of girls and 69% of boys have a full primary education. And poverty has fallen too: less than 10% of people live below the international poverty line (less than \$2.15 per day) – but this line is far too low.

Industrial activity, internal combustion engines, domestic fires etc, have polluted the air. As Ritchie points out, the rich countries of the world have taken action to reduce air pollution (though it is still bad at times in built up areas). Even China, which had terrible air quality in Beijing just before the Olympics has made great strides in cleaning up. It can be done and we know how to do it.

What about climate change? Ritchie shows how much progress has been made to cut GHG emissions. Most countries have cut their use of coal significantly. China and India are exceptions but they have slowed and their *per capita* use is much lower than, say the USA and Europe have been historically. Coal use is dying across the world.



From 1750 to 2019, the USA and Europe emitted 25% and 17% respectively of total CO₂, compared with China's 14%. China has the biggest programme of construction of renewable power generation driven in part by the need to clean up air pollution. It may be argued that as China and India are currently the biggest emitters, it's not worth us doing anything. This is a dead end. If we argue like this, we'll never get on top of climate change.

In our tech-savvy world, many of us have gadgets that consume power. Most of those under, say, 50 will have a smart phone, tablet or other piece of tech. Surprisingly, our carbon footprint is much less than that of our parents. In 1950, the UK annual *per capita* footprint was around 10 tonnes but in 2022 it was only 4.7 tonnes. Australia tops the league at 16.4 tonnes per person, with the USA just behind at 16 tonnes. The UK has such a low figure because we use almost no coal for electricity generation, we have switched to LED lighting and domestic appliances are more efficient. The cost of solar PV and wind power is now much lower than coal or gas. We must continue to expand these and add nuclear to the mix [nuclear is much safer than generally believed]. Power generation is responsible for about 25% of GHG emissions; the food system is roughly the same. We need to tackle emissions from the food system and that will also benefit biodiversity. CO₂ from making an electric car is higher than a petrol one but over 10 years, it produces only one third of the emissions.

I recommend reading the book mentioned above. Find it printed or as an e-book. See also: <https://ourworldindata.org>

Richard Marshall

Cold Ash Parish Greening Group helps individuals and the Community combat climate change. We need new members on the Committee. Please join us and help us achieve these aims. Contact the author, Richard Marshall (marshallr@btinternet.com).