

A New Year resolution for the environment

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Harini Nagendra. Credit: DH Illustration

As we dive into 2023, it seems almost obligatory to conduct a retrospective look back at the year that was – just as essential as New Year resolutions for the year. What did we do to the state of the environment in 2022?

First, the bad news. 2020 put a brake on global CO₂ emissions, but with the resumption of economic activities, CO₂ emissions hit a new record of 37.5 billion tons in 2022 – bringing us dangerously close to the threshold of 1.5°C global warming. Climate catastrophes – floods, droughts, storms and heatwaves – killed tens of thousands of people in areas as far flung as China, Brazil, Pakistan, India, South Africa and the US, displaced millions, and caused many billions of dollars in damage. Meanwhile, the sixth great global biodiversity extinction continued to sweep across the world, with as many as a million species at risk of disappearing from this world forever.

In a stark reminder of the many unforeseen ways in which humans impact the planet, while the Covid pandemic may seem to be on the downtrend, another pandemic continues to sweep through bird populations. Bird flu, a fallout of the intensive industrial farming of meat, continues to grow in scale and scope. This year, it has led to mass death in many wild bird populations in Europe, especially affecting migratory sea birds -- many of which are already close to extinction.

Is there no hope, you might ask. Indeed, there is. Just a few days back, intense negotiations at an international summit in Montreal led to a new biodiversity pact amongst countries – to protect 30% of the Earth's surface for biodiversity, and to include indigenous tribes and local communities in these efforts. The debates were intense and at times acrimonious – thus, the fact that an agreement was signed at all is indeed cause for celebration.

But, as always, commitments of money and funding for this protection are so far insufficient for the task, and there is no clarity on the roadmap that will help the world get to this point – in just eight years! However, the very fact that such an agreement was signed at all, with more specific and sharply focused targets compared to previous meetings, is a sign of hope. Cautious hope, but promising, nevertheless.

There are other steps that many countries are taking. A number of cities in the US are ripping out their parking lots and using them to create gardens and community spaces. Cities in different parts of the world are experimenting with going car-free in the city centre during the week, to combat air pollution. Rewilding initiatives are spreading across Europe, bringing locally extinct wildlife back to densely populated areas.

There is much that each of us can do to cut down our individual impact on the environment – buy less, travel sustainably, regift and reuse, reduce use of plastic, plant trees, grow flowers on our balconies in pots – and much more. A substantial chunk of our environmental footprint comes, however, from the systems we are embedded in – the fossil fuel-produced electricity we rely on, the industrial farming systems that produce our food, and the kinds of building materials we use for our homes and offices. Changing this requires a systemic shift. It requires public awareness, educating each other through conversation, and – that dirty word – activism. Especially, environmental activism.

Across the world, climate scientists are engaging with public communication and civic activism. Student associations have persuaded many of the world's leading universities to divest their funds from fossil fuel companies. In Bengaluru, green groups have filed PILs, staged street protests, and written petitions to stop tree-felling and to protect lakes from further devastation. Each of these have had their impact -- their effects continue to reverberate across the years, inspiring others.

This should be our New Year resolution. To be the change and to make a change to the system. If each of us takes the initiative to speak to ten others and start a real conversation on the state of the environment, how much can we achieve?