

# Meltdown: climbers & climate change

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*... and keen climber, most regularly found on the back wall of Hobson Moor Quarry (Hobby to its friends) and Glossop bouldering wall once the Winter weather sets in.*

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## Harmless fun

Bathed in the evening sun a climber's fingers curl reassuringly over a sharp edge on a perfect Kalymnos route. A scrambler inhales the fragrance of rosemary and pine on a limestone ridge overlooking the sparkling Mediterranean. An ice climber swings her axe into the flawless ice offered by Norway's Rjukan valley. Still further afield similar pleasures are being shared in the high Himalaya, skinning up Greenland's slopes, bouldering at Bishops, trekking in Peru and placing a slippery cam at Arapiles.

## Whose risk: our E9 or their Category 5?

Teetering on the edge of our wonderful addiction we're the ones taking the risks to reap the myriad rewards – or are we? What if the real risks are not of our fumbling a clip, the ice dinner plating, or our misreading a snow bridge, but instead are of others having their livelihoods and families ripped apart by stronger typhoons, losing precious crops though the salt ingress of rising sea levels, or the increase abuse of women and children within already stressed communities suffering months of drought.

Surely this can't have anything to do with our harmless enjoyment of magical moments on rock, snow and ice. But, there's the rub – it does. And each time we board the pinnacle of gas-guzzling activity and jet off to yet another vertical adventure we disproportionately threaten the very existence of those already struggling to eke out a living in grim conditions. Climate change is an existential problem; it begs fundamental questions about how we lead our lives and what sort of person we are.

## ... a rock & and hard place

Faced with such profound challenges the route of easiest salvation is to join the raucous chorus decrying the science underpinning climate change. If you think God hid fossils to confuse us about evolution and John Dunne and Ken Wilson are mild mannered ambassadors for our sport – then you have the option of joining Sarah Palin and dismissing climate change as a conspiracy of thousands of scientists hell bent on bringing down Western capitalism.

But for those combining a conscience with recognition that science trumps astrology – then even a basic understanding of climate change leaves us shifting uneasily in our squished easy-jet seat.

## So what are the basics?

The greenhouse effect exists and without it the earth's average temperature would be around 18°C below freezing (great friction on the grit!). Carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) is the most important of the long-lived greenhouse gases (i.e. it's essential for life). The level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere is increasing rapidly and has done so since the start of industrial revolution, but particularly since the middle of the last century (& too much CO<sub>2</sub> is a problem). This increase is being driven by the rapid rise in our use of coal, oil and gas, (we know this because fossil fuel CO<sub>2</sub> contains a unique chemical fingerprint). What we also know is that the temperature rise across this century relates to the total amount of carbon dioxide we emit during the century – in other words the carbon budget.

## How hot is too hot?

This is not a question science can answer. It can inform the debate, but in the end what is dangerous has to be a decision of civil society delivered through the inevitably messy process of international politics. Here, and I'll say this only once, the politicians deserve significant credit. This is one area of climate change they haven't ducked, reaching an international agreement that the global community must "avoid dangerous climate change", which it defines as maintaining the rise in the "average global surface temperature" to no more than 2°C across the century.

Of course, we don't live in global averages. A chilly day at Cloggy or a soggy Scafell Pike may benefit from a little warming. But 2°C average is around 6°C at the poles, huge regional changes in rainfall, increased drought and a much more energetic weather system. And whilst us wealthier elites in the climatically more resilient Northern hemisphere think we can ride out 2°C, for poorer and climatically more vulnerable communities 2°C will often prove dangerous and on many occasions deadly. But being poor these folk not only have very few emissions, but also little international clout or big weapons they can point at the unrepentant climbers spewing out yet more carbon in search of the next honey pot sold to us by Climber, Summit, Rock Fax and the like.

Despite the significant humanitarian merits of keeping the temperature rise below 2°C, our callous failure to heed any warning from the scientific community, has seen our escalating emissions all but blow the accompanying carbon

budget. Still worse, as the normally ever so conservative *International Energy Agency* warn, current CO2 “*trends are perfectly in line with a 6°C rise by the end of the century ... with devastating consequence for the planet*”.

### **But what can we do – surely it’s all about China**

Well no! Firstly, nations like the UK have an enormous responsibility for historical emissions – our quality of life was (and still is) built on the back of fossil fuels. Secondly, China, and many of the other poorer nations, have become our *de facto* manufacturers. Whilst we bask in the glories bestowed on us by Brown & Osborne’s bar and banking economy, our consumer-rich lives are dependent on the factories, power stations and pauper salaries of the Chinese, Bangladeshis, etc. Thirdly, the emissions related to how we live our lives (i.e. including imports and exports) are some 60% higher than those of the average Chinese person – with the typical American almost two times higher still. Finally, the trite argument that the UK is just 2% of global emissions is the recourse of the eloquent fool over the analytically thoughtful. California, Germany, Aviation, Shipping, Beijing and Shanghai are all in the ‘few %’ bracket.  $50 \times 2\% = 100\%$ . So our 2% matters – not just directly but more importantly as effective mitigation in the UK will help catalyse wider action elsewhere.

### **Back to us Climbers ...**

We no longer get to the crag or the occasional alpine trip by cycling, the train, thumbing a lift, or cramming 4 sweaty oiks & their kit into a mini clubman. Now it’s the powerful estate car, the flashy hatchback, Subaru 4WD or the moronic SUV. Worse still, the crag is often now far beyond the local outcrop, it’s a drive to Malham, bagging a quick Munroe, a long weekend in Calpe, a week at Smiths Rocks or a rapid ascent of some Alpine Peak. We take our litter home, the cars have catalytic converters, and we may even fall for the scam of ‘offsetting’ our flight’s emissions. But all this is conscience-salving crap.

A few moments reflection sees our self-delusion dissolve. We’re not custodians of the countryside, we’re not even concerned citizens – we’re simply smash & grab looters, taking what we can from millions of years of evolution and giving nothing back. Worse still, whilst we’re only too willing to embrace the cheap consumerism afforded by globalisation - child exploitation and lax environmental regulations (just check the labels of our rucsacs, thermals & bouldering pants) – we seldom stop to consider the reciprocal globalised impacts of our adventures on the poor and vulnerable. And when we do, it’s through some scheme to help impoverished Nepalese villages build a school, improve their sewage systems or equip a health centre – all trivial and ephemeral compared with the scale of the climate challenge we are superimposing on their already difficult lives.

### **Ok - we get the story - so what can we do?**

Let’s keep it simple. From a climate change perspective there are three principal opportunities for us to make a difference. The first is to radically reduce our use of energy. Identify our big-ticket CO2 activities, then reduce how often we do them and find alternatives. Curtail how

often we fly; drive less; share vehicles; buy efficient cars; and use trains & buses. From experience I can say this is not always easy – but it is doable and in some respects gets easier with time.

I’ve avoided hurtling off the end of a runway for 11 years, substituting with trains to France, Italy and Spain and driving slowly around Europe in my campervan. OK, Kalymnos is a challenge and returning to Thailand will have to wait for my retirement. But Sicily’s San Vito lo Capo is a fun train ride away & offers wonderful climbing

The second is to make a noise about the low-carbon changes we’re pioneering. In isolation the impacts of our individual emissions are relatively small. But become a vociferous ambassador demonstrating change and our actions have the real potential to catalyse a wider low-carbon ethos/movement. So in whatever way works for each of us, engage constructively with our climbing buddies, whether down the wall, at the crag, in our club newsletters, by emailing manufacturers and commenting in climbing magazines. Let’s make our voices heard!

The third is to facilitate rather than obstruct indigenous very low carbon energy. In the longer term we need to transition all our energy system to zero carbon emissions. Few climbers have the wherewithal to build their own large power stations, but we can all become a voice countering the Luddite status quo. Fossil fuels have had their century and we need now to think differently. Decentralised (e.g. local solar) complementing centralised energy (e.g. large wind farms, the Severn barrage, etc.); adjusting demand to match some inevitable increase in the intermittency of supply; increased electrification (remember just 20% of the energy we consume is electricity – the rest is principally oil and gas). So let’s be a strong and cogent voice arguing for the this essential transition – rather offering silent support for the status quo or whingeing about localised aesthetics whilst turning a blind eye to the devastation of Australian open-cast mines, Canadian tar sands and Qatar’s gas.

### **The game’s up**

In 2015 we can no longer plead ignorance – deep down we know that our pretence of environmental stewardship is up. Scattering a few BMC pebbles underneath worn boulders, taking the tram to the airport and buying ethical clothing do not compensate for the ecosystem destruction and human misery our hobby (for that’s what it is) imposes on others. But it doesn’t have to be like this.

Today’s climbers are typically wealthy and erudite. We have time and influence – at least collectively. We can still enjoy our hobby, but we can do so much more in tune with the evolutionary processes of nature and without destroying the very fabric of others’ lives. So let us be a beacon of hope, an ambassador of fundamental change. Let us lead by example. For your next climbing, walking or skiing trip, stop and think before you go plane crazy