

Good COP, bad COP: What is COP26 and why is it so important?

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In just a few short weeks one of the most important conferences to be held in recent years will take place. The global climate summit, known as COP26, will be held in Glasgow during the first two weeks of November.

The importance and relevance of COP26 cannot be underestimated given the domination of our news headlines, over recent months, by one environmental crisis after another - from extreme heat events and frequent wildfires, to catastrophic floods and biodiversity loss.

Events like these are becoming increasingly commonplace and, as our scientists predicted, are a result of climate change, they are now a reality for us here in Yorkshire, just as much as they are in distant lands. If left unchecked climate change will make life on earth at best far less comfortable and at worst unbearable.

There is however, still time to do something about it, if we can act more swiftly and implement the big global wide changes that are needed to curb fossil fuel emissions and boost nature recovery.

These summits, known as the UN's Conference of the Parties (COP) are where amendments to the global agreement on climate change are negotiated. The first COP was in Berlin in 1995 when most of the world had yet to register the significance of climate change. Twenty-six years later, COP26, co-hosted by the UK and Italy, will be the most significant since COP21 in Paris in 2015.

What emerged from COP21 is referred to as the Paris Agreement, a landmark in the multilateral climate change process, because for the first time a binding agreement brought all nations into a common cause, to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects.

The Paris Agreement was a breakthrough because it allowed all nations to make a pledge – or a nationally determined contribution – which if delivered (a crucial point) should start to slow the rate of global warming, with the ultimate aim of limiting the average level of warming to at least 2°C, and ideally to 1.5°C.

These figures don't sound like much, but they are massively significant for two main reasons. First, they are global annual averages and there will be big variations around the world, with the extremes being much higher and enough to trigger massive disruptions, including making some areas effectively uninhabitable. Second, the science is clear that 1.5°C of warming is a crucial tipping point. Stay within 1.5°C and we retain control of our future climate – but go beyond it and we risk triggering 'run away' climate change. In other words, if we go beyond 1.5°C of warming we lose control of our future, as a range of feedback loops kick-in where warming unlocks natural cycles that then drive further warming. One key natural cycle (there are many) relates to the melting of extensive areas of

permafrost which currently contain huge quantities of methane that if released would drive further warming.

Before the Paris Agreement, the world was headed to 4° or 5°C of warming – well into the range of runaway climate change. The pledges made at Paris (if they are delivered) should limit warming to around 3°C – still well beyond that crucial threshold. But Paris included provision for these commitments, and their delivery, to be reviewed after five years. Glasgow is the Paris-Plus-Five COP, where this review happens, so it is crucial that the commitments are upgraded and each country explains how it will deliver on these carbon cutting promises.

The prospect of accelerating climate breakdown, caused by our fossil fuel emissions into the biosphere, and biodiversity loss, is an unpleasant one to think about. In its most extreme form, it would mean the end of organised human society. It's not the earth we need to save - it will save itself – but ourselves, from being annihilated, as a result of making earth's climate uninhabitable.

Big changes are needed in humanity's relationship with the earth - our only home. Our ancestors were not capable of affecting 'earth systems', but we are, and right now our fossil fuel greedy societies are doing just that. Times of change can be turbulent and hard for all of us, but pretending climate change will not affect us and delaying action, as we have seen with the Covid pandemic, will lead to harder and more costly decision further down the line.

The good news is we have all the scientific knowledge and technology we need to transition to a thriving carbon neutral economy, powered by renewable energy. All that is needed is the political will to make it happen.

At COP26 we will be looking to our global leaders for clear strategic action, based not on wishful thinking, but on proven pathways to rapidly curb fossil fuel emissions, and boost nature recovery, to be rolled out at scale and at pace.

It is up to governments of the world to work together to forge these international agreements. Whilst we, as citizens, have a responsibility to remind our government - our political representatives - of the future we want for our beautiful Yorkshire and to show them that we are ready and willing to play our part by embracing carbon action here in the Harrogate District.

A good COP would see a global commitment from all countries to stop subsidising fossil fuel industries and the setting in place of an equitable agreement, where the 'carbon polluters' support and finance those nations and areas of the UK where climate change will have the most climate impact. The outcome of a bad COP is not even worth contemplating.