Headline: Harbinger of things to come?

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In recent weeks, we have witnessed a searing heatwave across the Pacific Coast of the US and Canada, which has already claimed the lives of hundreds of people. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reported record-breaking temperatures all across the region. For instance, in Portland, Oregon, where the average temperature in June is in the low 20s degrees Celsius, temperatures skyrocketed up to 44 degrees Celsius last June, eclipsing previous highs.

If there is a need for further evidence that the planet is warming, here is one more. But is there scientific support that the heatwave can be attributed to global warming? To answer this question, a group of climate scientists immediately proceeded to analyze the available data. Philip and coworkers (2021) concluded that without human-induced climate change, the Pacific Coast heatwave would be 150 times less likely. In addition, the paper estimated that the heatwave would have been lower by 2 degrees Celsius if there is no global warming. More ominously, if the planet becomes 2 degrees Celsius warmer than the 1850s (which may happen in the 2040s), such an event will be 1 degree Celsius hotter than today. Put another way, such a one-in-a-thousand-year heatwave would happen every five to 10 years.

According to the International Disaster Database housed in the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium, in 2020, extremely high temperatures were responsible for four out of 10 deaths globally due to disasters, the highest among all disasters. At the same time, almost the same proportion of people died due to flooding. Thus, as record heat waves fry parts of the world, massive floods are inundating many places. As our planet warms, heavier rainfall is expected so the risks due to flooding will likely multiply.

One implication of the above is that as we wrestle with containing COVID-19, we must take advantage of synergies and avoid negative trade-offs. McElwee and co-authors (2020) reviewed COVID-19 recovery programs worldwide to find out their impacts on addressing climate change and biodiversity conservation. Their research revealed that reducing environmental taxes in Vietnam and easing logging restrictions in Australia could worsen climate change and biodiversity loss. On the other hand, stimulus programs to green jobs in Uganda and tree planting in Pakistan could lead to biodiversity conservation.

We are once again reminded that we live in an interconnected world in more ways than we imagine. Recognizing such intricate relationships between humans and nature is a critical step in meeting the challenges we face. Ignoring these linkages will lead to half-baked solutions at best and catastrophic failures at worst.

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