

Form an orderly queue for the gas chamber¹

Peter Bowbrick

You are here, I am here, because ten thousand times in history your ancestors and mine survived famines, making sure that they had enough to eat while others starved to death. Ten thousand times population grew beyond what their traditional hunting grounds could support and they invaded their neighbours' territory.

We face the same problems. In the next fifty years oil price rises will make fertilizers prohibitively expensive, so Britain can feed perhaps a third of its present population. Global warming will halve the food production of many countries. The melting of the Greenland ice cap could stop the Gulf Stream, for the sixth time since the last ice age, making Britain so cold that it could only feed one in a hundred of its present population.

Random fluctuations in climate not related to our CO2 emissions could worsen the situation. It is worrying that the last 15,000 years since the ice age has been by far the longest period of stable warm climate in the last 400,000 years. And this stability is relative. In 11,500 BC the glacial meltwaters of Lake Agassiz escaped to the North Atlantic, stopping the Gulf Stream. Europe's climate became sub-arctic for 1000 years and its population fell to 40,000. In 6000BC, again, glacial meltwater hit the North Atlantic and slowed down or stopped the Gulf Stream. This time the mini ice age lasted 400 years. In 3800BV a change in the earth's angle to the sun resulted in 1000 years of very dry, unstable climate. In 2200BC another check in the Gulf Stream and a volcano eruption resulted in a 278 year drought period which destroyed civilizations. Another drought period about 1200BC may have caused the collapse of the Mycenaean and Hittite civilizations: certainly the dark ages lasted 400 years. Even the good times were not good for all: Europe's medieval warm period meant droughts that destroyed civilizations in America.

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When the time comes, will the tens of millions of us who cannot be fed be told, “Remember the Birkenhead! Women and children first!”? And will the words, “It is a far, far better thing that I do . . .” come from beneath tens of millions of stiff upper lips as we form an orderly queue for the gas chamber?

Or will we do what our ancestors did so often – find somewhere with a better climate, exterminate the inhabitants and move to a new Eden?

And keep hoping that nobody else has the same idea.