

~~22nd August 2020~~ 29th July 2021

29th July 2021 (updated 11th August) | Matt Mimms

This year, Earth Overshoot Day¹ falls on 29th July. This marks the day when humanity's demand for ecological resources and services in a given year exceeds what Earth can regenerate in that year. From now til the end of the year, we will in effect be depleting the earth's natural resources over and above its ability to regenerate (and accumulate waste over, in particular greenhouse gases over and above the earth's ability to absorb it). This is according to The Global Footprint Network, an award-winning international research organization which is focused and developing tools for advancing sustainability.

Last year, in the face of a global pandemic, Earth Overshoot Day fell on the 22 August. Unsurprisingly, and due to health-induced lockdowns, people worked from home more, travelled less and changed their consumer patterns. Global GDP contracted by 3.4%² and CO2 emission fell by 6.3%³. This year, and equally unsurprisingly, Earth Overshoot Day falls much earlier. The global economy has re-bounded with global growth predicted to be 6.0% in 2021 and 4.4% in 2022. And CO2 emissions are set to increase by nearly 5%³ (in 2021).

Singling out climate change, The United Nations Environment Programme estimates that the world would need to cut carbon emissions by 7.6% per year for the next decade to prevent the globe from warming by more than 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels (as agreed in Paris in 2015). The trend continues to go very much in the wrong direction.

2020 was the third warmest year on record with global temperatures on average 1.2 degrees above pre-industrial levels. Already this year, our headlines have been filled with stark illustrations that the climate change threat is real and happening now. From devastating floods in Germany and Belgium, to heatwaves and forest fires in Canada and the US northwest, from flooded undergrounds in Zhengzhou and London to record breaking temperatures, forest fires and melting permafrost in Siberia. Last month we learnt that the Amazon rain forest (traditionally viewed as a carbon sink) is now a net carbon emitter⁵.

The IPCC's recently released 6th Assessment Report⁶ leaves no doubt as to the gravity of the situation; as UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres states, "The alarm bells are deafening, and the evidence is irrefutable". The world is already 1.09 degrees warmer than pre-industrial levels. Human activity is (unequivocally) causing this warming. It is happening now and across every region of the world. It will get worse before it gets better. Meaningful action is required immediately; but it is still possible to avoid the worst effects of climate change if action is taken.

Earth Overshoot Day illustrates (once again), that we are living well beyond our resources and the damage to the planet is reaching a critical stage. There has been much talk of building back better and green new deals (such as President Biden's climate change plan) but transformative global coordinated action remains elusive.

In less than 100 days, the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 26) takes place in Glasgow. In a recent speech ahead of the conference, John Kerry (former US Secretary of State and special envoy to the US President) stated, "COP26 in Glasgow [is] a pivotal moment for the world to come together to meet and master the climate challenge ... in little more than 100 days, we can save the next hundred years."

¹<https://www.overshootday.org/>

²<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/03/23/world-economic-outlook-april-2021>

³<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00090-3>

⁴<https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-coronavirus-set-to-cause-largest-ever-annual-fall-in-co2-emissions>

⁵<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/14/amazon-rainforest-now-emitting-more-co2-than-it-absorbs>

⁶<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/secretary-generals-statement-the-ipcc-working-group-1-report-the-physical-science-basis-of-the-sixth-assessment>

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