

Keswick Reminder 12.09.25: NfWW No.95 Taking heatwaves seriously

Of all the hazards to our health, wellbeing and survival made worse by climate change heatwaves are by far the most serious. While the headlines may blaze with ‘What a scorcher!’ or ‘Head for the beach!’ the truth is that heatwaves are killers.

This summer there have been many dangerous heatwaves in the Northern Hemisphere. The UK had four, in June, July and August, albeit each relatively short and none as extreme as July 2022 when a record-breaking 40.3°C was recorded. Nevertheless, the UK summer was the hottest on record, with the average temperature made 70 times more likely by human-induced climate change, according to the Met Office.

Other parts of Europe, particularly, but not exclusively, Southern Europe, have had their heatwaves too, with Portugal and Spain recording 46°C in June.

Perhaps most alarmingly, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland have had truly unprecedented heatwaves this summer. At least one Norwegian weather station in each of its three most northerly counties recorded above 30°C for 12 successive days.

Beyond Europe there were heatwaves in India and Pakistan as early as April, and in Central Asia and Japan more recently. USA has not escaped, with record-breaking early summer heatwaves exposing 255 million Americans to ‘dangerous, life-threatening’ conditions.

So does all this matter? Shouldn’t we just enjoy the extra heat? The answer is most definitely ‘NO!’ and for several reasons. Heatwaves cause wildfires – witness the devastating fires both in Southern Europe this summer, and, closer to home, in North Yorkshire, where a four-week-old 10sq.m. blaze, made worse by drought, still burns at the time of writing.

Apart from the damage to nature, wildfires are seriously damaging to human health, with smoke and particulate inhalation causing respiratory and cardiac problems, particularly for those with pre-existing conditions.

But worse than wildfires, high temperatures, particularly when coupled with high humidities, cause heat exhaustion, heart attacks, thrombosis, kidney failure and deaths from heatstroke. And exposure to bright sunshine leads to more melanomas and cataracts.

Though some may like it, heat is a killer. In the European summer of 2003, which at the time was hottest since 1540, there were an estimated 70,000 excess deaths.

Since then, we in Europe have got better at coping with heatwaves, but still it is reckoned that this summer’s heatwaves in UK – though not excessive – led to 263 excess deaths in London alone. Contrast that, though, with a single day’s heatwave in India which can routinely kill tens of thousands, of whom construction workers, farm labourers and slum dwellers are especially vulnerable.

By 2050, over 5 billion people – probably more than half the planet’s population – will be exposed to at least a month of health-threatening extreme heat when outdoors in the sun. By then today’s extremes will be tomorrow’s norms.

So, yes, it is serious – very.

If you now feel the need to take action locally write to sustainablekeswick@gmail.com

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