

Humanity is waging war on nature, says UN secretary general

António Guterres lists human-inflicted wounds on natural world in stark message

- **World is ‘doubling down’ on fossil fuels despite climate crisis – UN report**

Fiona Harvey *Environment correspondent*

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A firefighter douses flames in Madera County, California, in September. Photograph: Josh Edelson/AFP/Getty

Humanity is facing a new war, unprecedented in history, the secretary general of the UN has warned, which is in danger of destroying our future before we have fully understood the risk.

The stark message from António Guterres follows a year of global upheaval, with the **coronavirus pandemic** causing governments to shut down whole countries for months at a time, while wildfires, hurricanes and powerful storms have scarred the globe.

Guterres said: “Humanity is waging war on nature. This is suicidal. Nature always strikes back – and it is already doing so with growing force and fury. Biodiversity is collapsing. One million species are at risk of extinction. Ecosystems are disappearing before our eyes ... Human activities are at the root of our descent toward chaos. But that means human action can help to solve it.”

He listed the human-inflicted wounds on the natural world: the spread of deserts; wetlands lost; forests cut down; oceans overfished and choked with plastic; dying coral reefs; air pollution killing 9 million people a year, more than the current pandemic; and the fact that 75% of new and emerging human infectious diseases have, like Covid-19, come from animals.

Though Guterres, like his two predecessors, has **frequently spoken** on the dangers of the climate crisis, this was his strongest language yet. The UN was founded 75 years ago at the end of the second world war to try to promote world peace after two devastating global conflicts. Guterres made a deliberate invocation of that original mission, applying it to the **climate and biodiversity crises**.

“Making peace with nature is the defining task of the 21st century,” he said, in a virtual address entitled The State of the Planet, at Columbia University in New York. “It must be the top, top priority for everyone, everywhere.”

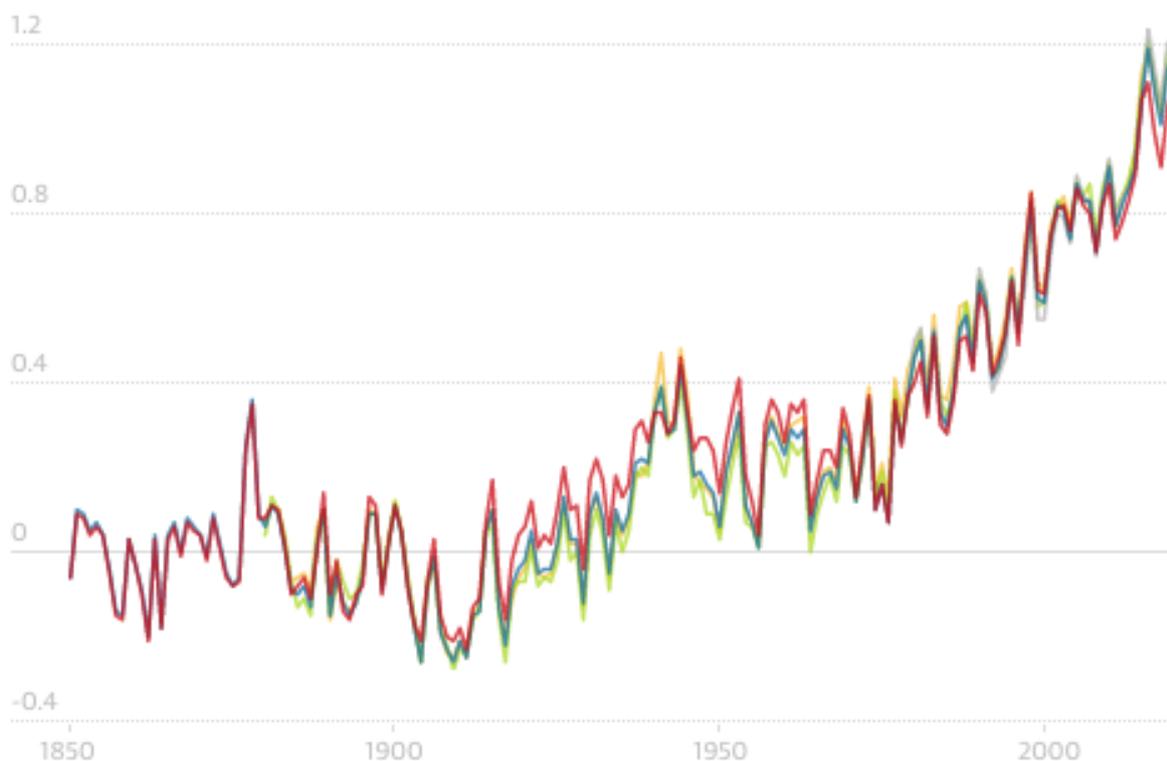
He said **future generations would face ruin** from our actions today. “This is an **epic policy test**. But ultimately this is a moral test ... We cannot use [our] resources to lock in policies that burden [future generations] with a mountain of debt on a broken planet.”

He also put inequality firmly at the heart of the problem, warning that the poorest and most vulnerable – even in rich countries – were facing the brunt of the attack.

Guterres said **greenhouse gas emissions were 62% higher** than when international climate negotiations began in 1990. A report from the World Meteorological Organisation, also published on Wednesday, found 2020 was on track to be one of the three warmest years on record globally, despite the cooling effects of the *La Niña* weather system, while the past decade was the hottest in human history and ocean heat was found to be at record levels.

Five datasets all show global mean temperature for 2020 about 1.2C above pre-industrial levels

■ NOAA GlobalTemp (degC) ■ GISTEMP (degC) ■ ERA-5 (degC) ■ WMO (degC) ■ HadCRUT (degC)



Guardian graphic | Source: World Meteorological Organization

Even with the **impacts of the coronavirus crisis**, greenhouse gas emissions are set to rise again this year.

However, Guterres also struck a note of hope. Many countries, including the biggest emitter, **China**, the EU, and the US president-elect, Joe Biden, have adopted targets of reaching net-zero emissions around the middle of the century. Renewable energy is now cheaper than coal in many regions, and new technologies such as electric vehicles are gaining pace.

He said: “I firmly believe that 2021 can be a new kind of leap year – the year of a quantum leap towards carbon neutrality. Sound economic analysis is our ally.”

Investors and governments must seize the opportunity to “flick the green switch” while there was still time, he said. He looked ahead to the vital UN Cop26 climate talks, to be hosted by the UK next year, as the moment when nations should make a decisive turn towards a green global economy.

In 10 days’ time, Guterres, along with the French government and Boris Johnson, will host a summit of world leaders to prepare for the Cop26 talks that were postponed by a year to next November because of the pandemic.

At the **Climate Ambition Summit**, which marks five years since the forging of the Paris agreement, governments are expected to affirm plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions drastically in the next decade, in line with their long-term goals.

Earlier this week, the Climate Action Tracker calculated that if all the net-zero pledges made by governments and leaders were to be fulfilled, temperatures would rise by about 2.1C above pre-industrial levels. That is not far above the upper limit set by the Paris agreement, of holding temperatures to

no more than 2C above pre-industrial levels, regarded as the limit of safety beyond which climate breakdown is likely to become **catastrophic and irreversible**.

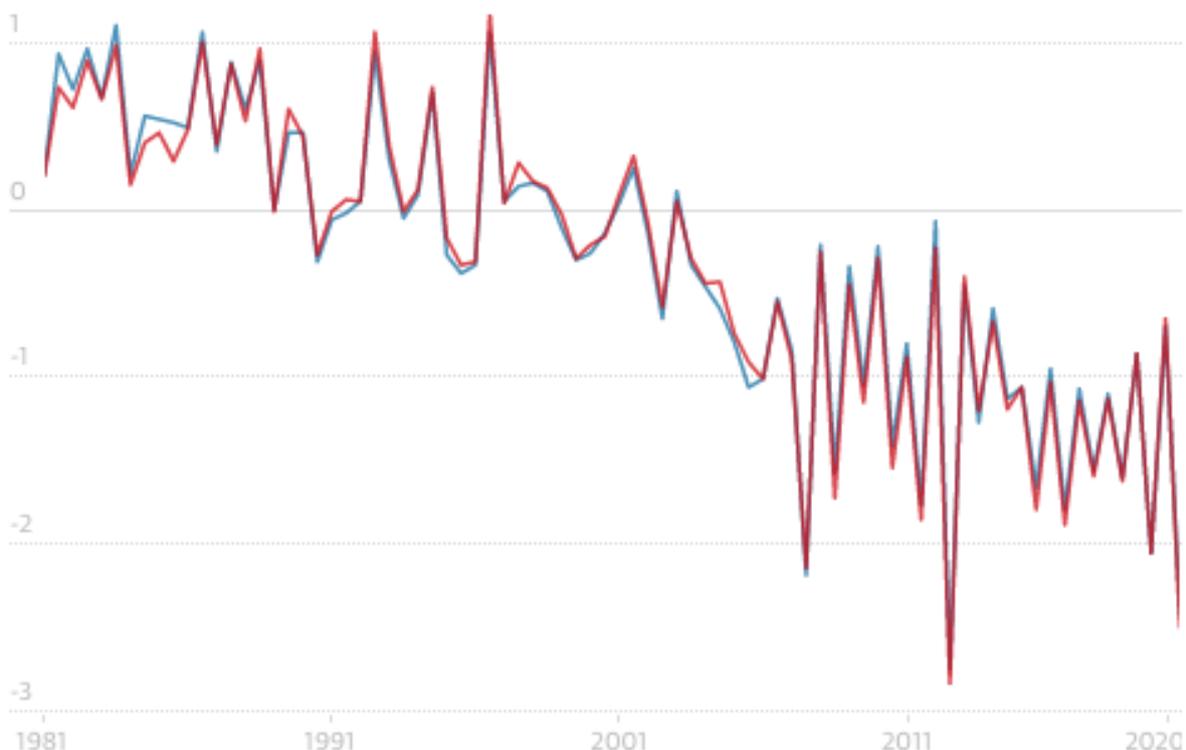
However, that depends on long-term targets set for decades hence to be fulfilled with action now. Guterres warned that pledges were not enough in themselves.

He said: “We need all governments to translate these pledges into policies, plans and targets with specific timelines. This will provide certainty and confidence for businesses and the financial sector to invest for net zero.”

The extent of Arctic sea ice in the summer is on a downward trend

Arctic sea ice extent difference from 1981-2010 average, million square kilometres

■ OSI SAF Sea Ice Index v2.1 (million km²) ■ NSIDC v3 (million km²)



Guardian graphic | Source: World Meteorological Organization. Note: NSIDC (National Snow and Ice Data Center), OSI SAF (Ocean and sea ice satellite application facilities),

Guterres called for countries to put a price on carbon emissions, stop investing in fossil fuels and phase out fossil fuel subsidies, stop building new coal power plants, and to shift their fiscal base from taxing incomes to taxing pollution.

He also said governments must act swiftly on the biodiversity crisis, as the UN plans several major conferences next year that will address species destruction, the oceans, food production and cities. “Next year gives us a wealth of opportunities to stop the plunder and start the healing,” he said.

The stark message from Guterres was echoed by Laurent Fabius, the French foreign minister, who led the **landmark Paris conference** in 2015. “There is no vaccine against climate warming,” he warned. “But there is an antidote, which is to fully implement the Paris agreement.”

He said financial assistance for developing countries would be essential to forging a global consensus on reaching net-zero emissions, as it was fundamental to success at Paris.

“Money, money, money,” said Fabius, was key to the talks, and rich countries must make good on their promise to provide at least \$100bn a year to developing nations, to help them cut emissions and cope with the impacts of climate breakdown.

Along with financial assistance, governments must try to ensure that the transition to a green economy benefited all sections of society, added Fabius. “The question of climate change is also a question of inequality. We must deal with this, otherwise we have a big problem.”

Amber Rudd, the former UK energy and climate minister, who represented the UK at the Paris talks, said Boris

Johnson had weakened his own position at Cop26 by reducing the UK's spending on overseas aid, which would diminish the host's leverage in bringing developing countries together.

“A country that understood the seriousness of Cop26 would not be cutting international aid right now,” she said.

Humans waging 'suicidal war' on nature - UN chief Antonio Guterres

By Justin Rowlett
Chief environment correspondent
Published
5 hours ago

"Our planet is broken," the Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, will warn on Wednesday.

Humanity is waging what he will describe as a "suicidal" war on the natural world.

"Nature always strikes back, and is doing so with gathering force and fury," he will tell a BBC special event on the environment.

Mr Guterres wants to put tackling climate change at the heart of the UN's global mission.

In a speech entitled State of the Planet, he will announce that its "central objective" next year will be to build a global coalition around the need to reduce emissions to net zero.

Net zero refers to cutting greenhouse gas emissions as far as possible and balancing any further releases by removing an equivalent amount from the atmosphere.

Mr Guterres will say that every country, city, financial institution and company "should adopt plans for a transition to net zero emissions by 2050". In his view, they will also need to take decisive action now to put themselves on the path towards achieving this vision.

The objective, says the UN secretary general, will be to cut global emissions by 45% by 2030 compared with 2010 levels.

- **Has the world started to take climate change fight seriously?'Earthshot': William and Attenborough launch prize to save planet**

- 'Earthshot': William and Attenborough launch prize to save planet
- You've got cheap data, how about cheap power too?

Here's what Mr Guterres will demand the nations of the world do:

- Put a price on carbon
- Phase out fossil fuel finance and end fossil fuel subsidies
- Shift the tax burden from income to carbon, and from tax payers to polluters
- Integrate the goal of carbon neutrality (a similar concept to net zero) into all economic and fiscal policies and decisions
- Help those around the world who are already facing the dire impacts of climate change



Our war on the natural world will come back to haunt us, says Mr Guterres

Apocalyptic fires and floods

It is an ambitious agenda, as Mr Guterres will acknowledge, but he will say radical action is needed now.

"The science is clear," Mr Guterres will tell the BBC, "unless the world cuts fossil fuel production by 6% every year between now and 2030, things will get worse. Much worse."

Climate policies have yet to rise to the challenge, the UN chief will say, adding that "without concerted action, we may be headed for a catastrophic three to five-degree temperature rise this century".

The impact is already being felt around the world.

"Apocalyptic fires and floods, cyclones and hurricanes are the new normal," he will warn.

"Biodiversity is collapsing. Deserts are spreading. Oceans are choking with plastic waste."

Moment of truth

Mr Guterres will say the nations of the world must bring ambitious commitments to cut emissions to the international climate conference the UK and Italy are hosting in Glasgow in November next year.

As well as pressing for action on the climate crisis, he will urge nations to tackle the extinction crisis that is destroying biodiversity and to step up efforts to reduce pollution.

We face, he will say, a "moment of truth".

But he does discern some glimmers of hope.

More from Our Planet Now:

- [Attenborough: 'Curb excess capitalism' to save nature](#)
- [Extinction crisis: Leaders say it is time to act](#)
- [Biodiversity: Why the nature crisis matters, in five graphics](#)
- [What's in Boris Johnson's climate in tray?](#)

He will acknowledge that the European Union, the US, China, Japan, South Korea and more than 110 other countries have committed to become carbon neutral by the middle of this century.

He will say he wants to see this momentum turned into a movement.

Technology will help us to reach these targets, Mr Guterres will say he believes.



Technology could help forge a more sustainable path, says Antonio Guterres

"The coal business is going up in smoke," because it costs more to run most of today's coal plants than it does to build new renewable plants from scratch, he will tell the BBC.

"We must forge a safer, more sustainable and equitable path", the UN chief will conclude.

He will say it is time for this war against the planet to end, adding: "We must declare a permanent ceasefire and reconcile with nature."

December 2, 2020, 10:11 AM CBS

"War on nature" is "suicide" and climate action needs American leadership, U.N. chief says

United Nations – Humans are waging "war on nature," according to U.N. Secretary General António Guterres, and the world is close to a "breaking point" if leaders don't come together now to change course.

"There is a growing consciousness that the way we are moving is a suicide in relation to the future and to all future generations," Guterres told "CBS This Morning" co-host Tony Dokoupil in an interview that aired Wednesday.

The U.N. chief has been warning against the dire impact of climate change for years and made his case in a speech on

"the state of the planet" at Columbia University in New York Wednesday.

"Nature always strikes back – and it is already doing so with growing force and fury; biodiversity is collapsing; ecosystems are disappearing before our eyes; and oceans are ... choking with plastic waste," Guterres said.

In his address, Guterres outlined the needed action: To achieve global carbon neutrality within the next three decades; to align global finance behind the Paris Agreement, "the world's blueprint for climate action"; and to "deliver a breakthrough on adaptation to protect the world ... from climate impacts."

Guterres calls for more conservation areas that are "biodiversity-positive" for agriculture and fisheries. He also urges a phasing out of negative subsidies – subsidies that destroy healthy soils, pollute waterways and deplete the fish in the oceans – and a shift away from unsustainable extractive resource mining and toward more sustainable consumption patterns.

And, focusing on the **role of the environment in the pandemic**, Guterres pointed to a startling fact: "75% of new and emerging human infectious diseases are **zoonotic**," he says, meaning they come from animals. He warns that with "people and livestock encroaching further into animal habitats and disrupting wild spaces, we could see more viruses and other disease-causing agents jump from animals to humans."

Despite a temporary **drop in emissions** due to the COVID-19 lockdown, **atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases** remain at record highs, committing the planet to further warming for many generations to come because of the long lifetime of CO₂ in the atmosphere, according to a new World Meteorological report released on Wednesday.

"The past decade was the hottest in human history," Guterres said. "Apocalyptic fires and floods, cyclones and hurricanes are **increasingly the new normal**."

Guterres spoke with Dokoupil from U.N. Headquarters in New York as part of "Covering Climate Now," an initiative of more than 400 news outlets dedicated to explaining the dangers of a warmer earth. Here are excerpts of their conversation:

Tony Dokoupil: Mr. Secretary General, you are preparing a major address on climate change. It is called the State of the Planet. So let's begin there. What is the state of the planet?

Antonio Guterres: We are at war with nature. And this creates the serious risk to have a broken planet as we move on towards the end of the century. We are still in line with an increase of temperature of 3° to 5° [Celsius] in the end of the century.

That would be absolutely devastating for the world economy and for human life...Forests that are disappearing, glaciers that are melting, coral reefs that are bleaching and being destroyed.

So it's time for the war between humankind and nature to end. It's time to reconcile humankind with nature. It's time to make peace with nature, and to do everything possible for our planet in the end of the century to be something we can be proud of, and where our children and grandchildren can live a normal life.

Mr. Secretary General, how close are we to a breaking point?

I think we are very close to the breaking point. If you look at temperature, we are now with an increase of temperature, an average increase of temperature of about 1.2° [Celsius]. We want to have 1.5° as the limit. So we are very close to the breaking point.

And if we do not act immediately, things will be irreversible. And when things are irreversible, then it means that the future of our children and grandchildren will be dramatically impacted. So this is the moment to change course. And that is why for the U.N. in 2021 we have a very clear objective.

And our objective is to build a global coalition for net zero emissions in 2050, for carbon neutrality.

Why do you think it's possible now when the United Nations has been talking about this for 30 years, and in that time, the problem has only gotten worse?

Now we are not alone. We see the youths mobilizing in fantastic ways all over the world. We see entrepreneurs

gaining conscience. We see asset owners telling that they need to decarbonize their portfolios, because if not they will lose money in the future.

We see more and more companies saying that they need to align themselves with net zero emissions. We see pressure coming from civil society. So governments that until now, to a certain extent, thought that they could do whatever they wanted, are now under enormous pressure by public opinions, by the youths, by the private sector.

How important was it for Joe Biden to have won the election in 2020?

I think that the fact that the incoming administration has announced that they will again join the Paris Agreement, and they will commit to net zero emissions in 2050 is absolutely crucial to rescue the planet.

And I believe this is a fundamental contribution. There is no way, no way we can solve the problems of the relationship between humankind, nature, between us and the planet, without a strong American leadership.

The world's oil and gas companies have trillions of dollars of oil and gas that they know about, that they're waiting to dig up and to sell. Who is going to pay those companies to not dig it up and burn it?

The value of companies in history changes with the changing conditions of the global economy. There was a cycle of oil as the key engine of the world economy. That cycle is finished. So the value of oil and gas companies will

diminish as the value of coal companies is already diminishing.

So I'm totally convinced, totally convinced that inevitably the history of humankind will be a history such that a lot of the oil and gas that is today in the soil will remain in the soil.

Mr. Secretary General, the United States pulled out of the [Paris] Agreement ... nothing happened. No repercussions. What message does that send to the rest of the world?

I would say the majority of the countries have not been able to fulfill their commitments made in Paris. And this is what I believe will change course, because there is a growing consciousness that the way we are moving is a suicide in relation to the future and to all future generations.

It is clear for me that if we would leave temperatures at 3° or 5° increase at the end of the century, the conditions of living in our planet will be severely undermined.

So to take your metaphor, the world is on the ledge, and your job is to convince the world to step off of it rather than jump.