

Climate change Will Transform the Face Of Europe

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Europe, the richest and most fertile continent and the model for the modern world, will be devastated by climate change, the European Union predicts today.

The ecosystems that have underpinned all European societies from Ancient Greece and Rome to present-day Britain and France, and which helped European civilisation gain global pre-eminence, will be disabled by remorselessly rising temperatures, EU scientists forecast in a remarkable report which is as ominous as it is detailed.

Much of the continent's age-old fertility, which gave the world the vine and the olive and now produces mountains of grain and dairy products, will not survive the climate change forecast for the coming century, the scientists say, and its wildlife will be devastated.

Europe's modern lifestyles, from summer package tours to winter skiing trips, will go the same way, they say, as the Mediterranean becomes too hot for holidays and snow and ice disappear from mountain ranges such as the Alps – with enormous economic consequences. The social consequences will also be felt as heat-related deaths rise and extreme weather events, such as storms and floods, become more violent.

The report, stark and uncompromising, marks a step change in Europe's own role in pushing for international action to combat climate change, as it will be used in a bid to commit the EU to ambitious new targets for cutting emissions of greenhouse gases.

The European Commission wants to hold back the rise in global temperatures to 2C above the pre-industrial level (at present, the level is 0.6C). To do that, it wants member states to commit to cutting back emissions of carbon dioxide, the principal greenhouse gas, to 30 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020, as long as other developed countries agree to do the same.

Failing that, the EU would observe a unilateral target of a 20 per cent cut.

The Commission president, José Manuel Barroso, gave US President George Bush a preview of the new policy during a visit to the White House this week.

The force of today's report lies in its setting out of the scale of the continent-wide threat to Europe's "ecosystem services".

That is a relatively new but powerful concept, which recognises essential elements of civilised life – such as food, water, wood and fuel – which may generally be taken for granted, are all ultimately dependent on the proper functioning of ecosystems in the natural world. Historians have recognised that Europe was particularly lucky in this respect from the start, compared to Africa or pre-Columbian America – and this was a major reason for

Europe's rise to global pre-eminence.

"Climate change will alter the supply of European ecosystem services over the next century," the report says. "While it will result in enhancement of some ecosystem services, a large portion will be adversely impacted because of drought, reduced soil fertility, fire, and other climate change-driven factors.

"Europe can expect a decline in arable land, a decline in Mediterranean forest areas, a decline in the terrestrial carbon sink and soil fertility, and an increase in the number of basins with water scarcity. It will increase the loss of biodiversity."

The report predicts there will be some European "winners" from climate change, at least initially. In the north of the continent, agricultural yields will increase with a lengthened growing season and a longer frost-free period. Tourism may become more popular on the beaches of the North Sea and the Baltic as the Mediterranean becomes too hot, and deaths and diseases related to winter cold will fall.

But the negative effects will far outweigh the advantages. Take tourism. The report says "the zone with excellent weather conditions, currently located around the Mediterranean (in particular for beach tourism) will shift towards the north". And it spells out the consequences.

"The annual migration of northern Europeans to the countries of the Mediterranean in search of the traditional summer 'sun, sand and sea' holiday is the single largest flow of tourists across the globe, accounting for one-sixth of all tourist trips in 2000. This large group of tourists, totalling about 100 million per annum, spends an estimated €100bn (£67bn) per year. Any climate-induced change in these flows of tourists and money would have very large implications for the destinations involved."

While they are losing their tourists, the countries of the Mediterranean may also be losing their agriculture. Crop yields may drop sharply as drought conditions, exacerbated by more frequent forest fires, make farming ever more difficult. And that is not the only threat to Europe's food supplies. Some stocks of coldwater fish in areas such as the North Sea will move northwards as the water warms.

There are many more direct threats, the report says. The cost of taking action to cope with sea-level rise will run into billions of euros. Furthermore, "for the coming decades, it is predicted the magnitude and frequency of extreme weather events will increase, and floods will likely be more frequent and severe in many areas across Europe."

The number of people affected by severe flooding in the Upper Danube area is projected to increase by 242,000 in a more extreme 3C temperature rise scenario, and by 135,000 in the case of a 2.2C rise. The total cost of damage would rise from €47.5bn to €66bn in the event of a 3C increase.

Although fewer people would die of cold in the north, that would be more than offset by increased mortality in the south. Under the more extreme scenario of a 3C increase in 2071-2100 relative to 1961-1990, there would be 86,000 additional deaths.

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