

No singing in this rain

joanna van gruisen

Well into March this year, we were still in three layers and a shawl in North India. Climate change, anyone?

A constant source of conversation this winter, this prolonged winter that only recently ended in northern India, has been the weather. As a Brit, I am used to the elements being a popular topic, but here this is not usually so. The climate of the subcontinent used to be so regular, it was said you could set your watch by the coming of the monsoon. It has been a while since this was so, nevertheless, if one was asked, for example, what the weather would be like in February, it was easy enough to give an accurate response. Not this year! Who could have predicted that well into March, we would still be in three layers and a shawl, watching downpours of monsoon weight? In our eco-resort with no air conditioning and with outdoor activities, we close mid-April as it becomes too hot to be comfortable in the open. This was hard to believe when only six weeks before, we were still using hot water bottles to take the chill off the beds at night!

The only bright side to this is that finally more people — including hopefully, our politicians and policy makers — will recognise that ‘climate change’ exists. It’s extraordinary that there are still doubters, even when in the field of climate science, the consensus is unequivocal: human activities are causing global warming and severe climate changes (at least 97 per cent of all relevant papers show that.) It’s even more shocking that those in authority are not taking steps to mitigate the effect, or taking into account the implications of this, especially for vulnerable sectors like agriculture.

Excessive cold, sunless and wet days may be tiresome for tourists travelling in India, but for some, this weather presents a life-and-death situation. In our area the wheat crop had just reached that green-gold stage. Tall waving strands turning colour — the worst possible time for powerful winds, hail and slashing rain that lay them flat. Walking around the neighbouring channa field, I notice it’s lush and green but there’s hardly a chickpea to be found.

We should be heading for the height of the dry season. This year, in our district of MP, 86.2mm of rain has been recorded for January and February — almost 200 per cent more than is considered average. Six of these eight weeks recorded excessive rain, according to the India Meteorological Department. Such wreckage to the crops is already starting a new wave of farmer suicides. Since 1995 over 2.8 lakh farmers have taken their lives in the face of crop failures and excessive debts, that’s more than 45 suicides every day! Banking policies, exploding input costs and crashing crop prices provide the dry tinder that any spark may set alight — even an untimely hailstorm.

In what warped world can it make sense to give a loan for a Mercedes Benz car for half the interest of buying a working tool like a tractor? The agricultural community may be a diminishing vote bank, but it’s time we gave them the attention they deserve — for all our welfare.

(joanna van gruisen is a wildlife photographerconservationisthotelier based near the Panna Tiger Reserve)

(This article was published on April 4, 2014)