



JOANNA VAN GRUISEN

A BUTTERFLY BREEZE FROM MP

The number game

Before you rejoice, note the skewed equation of political will and greenhouse gases in India

BJP - 282+ : CO2 - 400+

As April slips into May, the daytime temperatures in our part of Madhya Pradesh are not very conducive to tourism, so we shut shop and wait for the cooler months. It is however, a glorious arboreal month: the number of trees that are in flower and in the flush of wonderful fresh greens or stunning crimsons of new leaf must be the highest at this time. We delighted in this eye feast as we drove to Delhi early in May. It was marriage season too so we passed an inordinate number of bullock carts, tractor-trailers, small trucks and roof-laden buses piled high with dowries (mattresses, furniture, refrigerators, steel cupboards, etc) travelling to homes of the newly marrieds. But even more than this, we shared the road with innumerable trucks weighed down with the recently harvested wheat crop. Many new go-downs have sprung up (some still being constructed), and in front of them all were long lines of trucks and trailers waiting to offload their produce. MP is expecting another bumper harvest in spite of unseasonable rain in some areas. It certainly looked that way.

Last year's procurement of wheat in MP has increased more than tenfold over the last decade. Procurement this year is already up another 25 per cent and it is thought that MP is



Great expectations Could the celebrations of high agricultural yield in India, and the preparations for such sustained growth over the next few years, be overhasty? REUTERS

set to surpass even Punjab in wheat production: 19 million tonnes is the amount predicted – hence the urgency of building more grain storage facilities. However, celebrations of such agricultural success and preparations for a continuing high may be short-lived. Apart from the unsustainable excess of pesticides, there is concern as to whether MP – or indeed India as a whole – will be able to uphold such production over the coming years or decades. The agricultural sector is the most sensitive to climate change and wheat is one of the vulnerable crops. Although admittedly there is little certainty to the predictions as a number of issues make for a complex scenario, many scientists are concerned that climate change and our warming planet will have the effect of lowering the production of several food items, including wheat. Where detailed research on wheat has been done, lower yields are the general conclusion.

Midst the election-dominated news of the last few weeks was a disturbing announcement that did not seem to get the attention it deserves. Admittedly it does not make for sexy headlines but it is an event that affects us all and should give everyone pause for thought. It needs to be factored into our government vision, our agricultural policies, our development strategies, our energy production, actually into just about everything. Once the euphoria of victory dissipates a little, let us hope that the recent victors and new rulers of our country will open their eyes and minds to the meaning of this milestone the world just hit.

May 2014 ushered in a new era for India – the electoral change is likely to generate huge transformations. But we also entered a new era in April. This was the first time – for at least 800,000, maybe even 15 million years (the world was a bit of a different place then!) – that the amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in

our earth's atmosphere remained over 400 parts per million (ppm) for a full month. CO₂, as I hope everyone now knows, is the chief greenhouse gas that results from human activities and is responsible for global warming and climate change. We first hit this level on May 9, 2013 but April 2014 was the first month in human history that it remained above this consistently. To give this some perspective: pre-industrial levels of CO₂ were around 280ppm. It is of course just a number but climatologists agree that 400 is a 'historic threshold' and we have 'entered a new danger zone'.

Why should this be headline news? Because it will change the world as we know it. The upper safety limit was pegged at 350ppm. The last time the earth's CO₂ was below this was in the year 1987. In spite of all the earth summits and international protocols, most countries continue to rely on and burn fossil fuels and the increase in greenhouse gases continues to accelerate. As one of the world's best known climatologists, Dr James Hansen, says: "If humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilisation developed and to which life on earth is adapted, paleoclimate evidence and ongoing climate change suggest that CO₂ will need to be reduced from (current levels) to at most 350 ppm." When you read of melting glaciers and disappearing arctic ice shelves, when wheat harvests are no longer bumper but deficient, remember these figures and know why. We have already delayed too many decades: the longer we postpone action to mitigate this, the more expensive economically, ecologically and sociologically it will be. Will the new push for development factor this in? My fears are that it will not.

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JOANNA VAN GRUISEN is a wildlife photographer, conservationist and hotelier based near the Panna Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh

