

## As the world burns ...

Written by Charleen Clarke  
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Our planet is bleeding! Global warming has already had dire consequences – and there are more to come. CHARLEEN CLARKE details eight truly terrifying (yet sadly realistic) scenarios that we can expect ...

An escalation in natural disasters, decreased food security and the extinction of marine life ... Human-induced global warming could well mean the end of life as we know it! But, practically speaking, what can man or woman expect from global warming?

### 1. Temperatures will soar

We know that this is the most obvious consequence – but it merits mention because a hotter planet is not a happier one for its inhabitants. Heatwaves kill people – it was reported that at least 35 000 people died in the scorching month of August 2003 in Europe (some say the figure was as high as 70 000). The World Health Organization says that climate change will result in approximately 250 000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2050 – thanks to malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress.

### 2. More natural disasters will affect millions



Natural disasters are a “growth” industry. “Since the 1960s, on a global scale, economic losses from natural disasters have tripled, while insured losses have quintupled,” reveals Jonas Strömberg, Scania’s director sustainable solutions.

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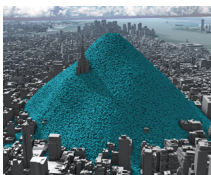
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These natural disasters show no indication whatsoever of waning. On the contrary, they look to be as out of control as a runaway train. In fact, the University of Cambridge's Herbert Huppert and Stephen Sparks have come up with doomsday-like predictions. "For the foreseeable future, the world can expect several natural events per year that can kill tens of thousands of people, adversely affect millions of people and cause severe economic and social disruption. A calamity with a million casualties is just a matter of time!" they warn in their article, *Extreme Natural Hazards: Population Growth, Globalisation and Environmental Change*.

### 3. We will face food shortages

Climate change is making a world without hunger impossible. That's because it will have a far-reaching impact on food security throughout the world, especially for the poor and those living in tropical regions. As the world's leaders highlighted at the Paris 2015 United Nations (UN) Climate Conference (also known as COP21), warmer temperatures and altered precipitation patterns will threaten food production, disrupt transportation systems and degrade food safety.

In South Africa we're already seeing the impact of the drought on food security ... but we ain't seen nothing yet. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the leading international body for the assessment of climate change), if global warming continues on its merry path, agricultural production in African countries could drop by as much as 50 percent by 2020, and crop net revenues could fall by as much as 90 percent by 2100.



Ironically, climate change is about to undo all the good work that's been done in the past to alleviate hunger. According to a report – entitled *Climate Change, Global Food Security, and the US Food System* – which was released at COP21, we've actually done a pretty good job of reducing the number of people at risk of undernourishment. In the early 1990s, it stood at a whopping one billion! Today, it's dropped to 805 million.

With climate change rearing its ugly head, that figure is about to increase again – by 175 million in 2080.

### 4. Water shortages are likely

All over the world, “water stress” will result from global warming. Asia, which also has to contend with population and economic growth (on top of global warming), is predicted to face a “high risk” of severe water stress. In fact, within the next 35 years, there will be one billion more people who are water stressed (versus today).

### 5. Ocean life will be decimated

Food security isn't the only problem a warmer world will present: marine life will be affected adversely as well. According to Strömberg, we have already lost more than 40 percent of the Arctic summer ice as a result of global warming – and the rate is increasing rapidly; an ice-free Arctic summer is possible by 2040.

Our oceans are also becoming more acidic because they are absorbing far too much CO<sub>2</sub>. (The CO<sub>2</sub> reacts with seawater to form carbonic acid. This causes the ocean to become more acidic.) As Professor Hans-Otto Pörtner, a researcher at the Alfred Wegener Institute, Helmholtz Centre for Polar and Marine Research, so clearly explains: “To date, the oceans have essentially been the planet's refrigerator and carbon dioxide storage locker. For instance, since the 1970s they've absorbed roughly 93 percent of the additional heat produced by the greenhouse effect, greatly helping to slow the warming of our planet.”



Thanks to global warming, our oceans are now in poor shape, as Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg, director of The University of Queensland's Global Change Institute, notes. “The ocean, which produces half of the oxygen we breathe and absorbs 30 percent of human-generated CO<sub>2</sub>, is equivalent to the earth's heart and lungs. Quite plainly, the earth cannot do without its ocean, but it shows worrying signs of ill health. It's as if the earth has been smoking two packs of cigarettes a day!”

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Ultimately, this means that we now have the perfect storm in terms of our oceans, which are both hotter and more acidic than ever before. We could be facing a sweeping loss of species in the near future as a result. Coral reefs, for instance, will die – and they're vital to the continuation of many marine species. Ultimately, a veritable wave of marine extinctions could result.

### **6. Animal life in general will be threatened**

It's not only ocean life that faces extinction as a result of global warming; plants and animals that need to live in cold places could also be on the way out. According to the American Center for Biological Diversity, we're currently experiencing the worst spate of species die-offs since the loss of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.

“Although extinction is a natural phenomenon, it occurs at a natural ‘background’ rate of about one to five species per year. Scientists estimate we're now losing species at 1 000 to 10 000 times the background rate, with literally dozens going extinct every day. It could be a scary future indeed, with as many as 30 to 50 percent of all species possibly heading toward extinction by mid-century,” it warns.

### **7. The rising ocean will destroy infrastructure**

People live near water – in fact, half the world's population lives within 60 km of the ocean. Furthermore, 75 percent of all large cities are located on the coast, but ocean levels are rising exponentially – which could translate into the flooding of millions of houses. The United Nations says that

147 to 216 million people will lose their homes to submersion or flooding by 2100.

### **8. Increased risk of armed conflict**

