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Earthly remains

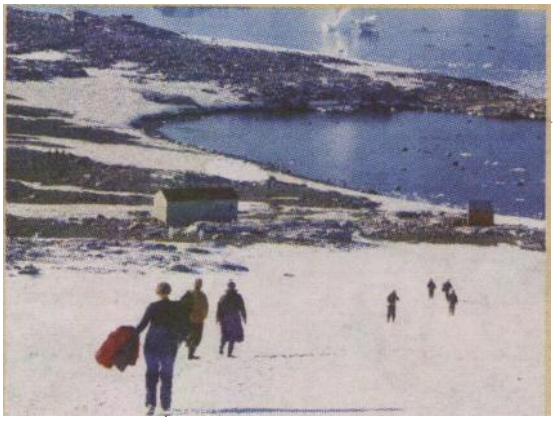
Stephen Price

■ Swedish scientists working off the Russian Arctic coast have something extremely disturbing to report; the release of methane into the atmosphere from undersea deposits. Methane is 21 times more potent a greenhouse gas than CO2.

Large quantities are compressed and/or frozen under various areas of seabed and in frozen bogs. Its release is a perfectly natural process and harmless for us provided it happens slowly enough, when much of it can be consumed by micro-organisms. However, if we have now warmed the seas and the atmosphere to the point where large quantities are released, then that might trigger runaway warming – a greenhouse feedback that we're utterly powerless to control. Even as it stands, the last time that the earth had current levels of CO2 in the atmosphere was 650,000 years ago. At which point, we were still evolving into something resembling what we are now.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) disputes the findings – reported in the main article some weeks ago – of US and Swedish researchers who identified 20 "dead zones" around the Irish coast. Dead zones occur where oxygen levels fall so far that marine life cannot survive – usually due to fertiliser run-off creating heavy algal blooms that leech oxygen from the water as they decay.

At dispute is the quality of the researchers' data. This came from the OSPAR Commission, which coordinates international cooperation on the marine protection of the Atlantic. Water quality is a sensitive issue in Ireland at the moment, as the EU has just ruled against us on the issue of waste water treatment (sewage pumped into the sea, to you and me), but that doesn't mean that the EPA is wrong. More on this discussion as it unfolds.



Arctic coast: under threat?