

# Here's why you should be hopeful about climate action in 2021

We have been in many last chance saloons with climate change, but there are now reasons to believe we might finally go out and take action, writes **Graham Lawton**

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By [Graham Lawton](#)



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ONE temptation that is hard to resist when writing about the environment is the narrative of the last chance saloon – the cliché that the next summit or election is the final opportunity to avert climate or biodiversity crisis, and if it is lost, all is lost.

I have written a few dispatches from the saloon and understand its appeal. The analogy is urgent and motivational, while the alternative is to point out that there is, in fact, another saloon over the horizon and that failure isn't terminal. The problem is, if you overuse an analogy, it loses its power. Especially if it isn't true.

But as 2021 gets into its stride, I think we may have seen the last of the last chance saloon. I'm wary of making any firm predictions – 2020 exposed the folly of doing that –

but there are increasing signs that humanity spent much of last year sat in that particular bar, drank its fill, stared at the bottom of the glass and finally decided it was time to quit.

Despite the ongoing climate and biodiversity crises, there is a whiff of green optimism in the air. Much of it is emanating from the silver linings of a dismal 2020, which this time last year [I predicted would be pivotal for the planet](#). I was right, of course, though for the wrong reasons.

Back then, we were just months away from important global negotiations on climate and biodiversity. The pandemic meant both had to be postponed. They are now tentatively [rescheduled for later this year](#) – and maybe for the better. If they had happened as planned, in the middle of a business-as-usual 2020, they probably would have produced a business-as-usual outcome: warm words but little action.

But times have changed. The pandemic not only exposed how close we are to the environmental precipice, it also proved humanity is actually capable of [responding to existential threats](#). It is perhaps no coincidence that 2020 saw some of the most significant climate commitments ever made by national and transnational bodies: net-zero pledges by China, Japan and South Korea; the [European Union's Green Deal](#); the UK's lead on green finance, including compelling big companies to come clean about their [exposure to climate risks](#); and a greener-than-expected Brexit deal. On top of this, renewable energy continued its drive to outcompete fossil fuels, while the desire to build a better post-pandemic world exploded and [remains strong](#).

“The national political tremors promise to deliver an international earthquake in 2021 and beyond”

There was also a changing of the guard in the US, still the key player in the global carbon casino. Assuming Trump's attempted coup d'état fails (even after four years of seditious agitation, I still cannot believe I'm writing that), Joe Biden will be inaugurated as president next week. Even better, Biden's party hung on to the House of Representatives and won a controlling vote in the Senate.

With the presidency and both houses of Congress under progressive control – and in possession of a clear mandate for climate action, at least until mid-term elections in late 2022 – there will be no knuckle-dragging on the US rejoining the Paris climate agreement, no knuckleheaded veto of the planned Green New Deal in the US, and a fair wind for other pro-environmental policies.

Taken together, these national political tremors of 2020 promise to deliver an international earthquake in 2021 and beyond. According to a perceptive analysis by Bloomberg Green journalist Akshat Rathi, they are signs that the world is [finally moving decisively towards a low-carbon future](#). Climate action, he writes, “is starting to be ‘institutionalized’ – that is, getting deeply embedded into how the world works”.

This year will also see a ramping up of pressure from those decades-long (and hitherto frustratingly unsuccessful) international efforts to institutionalise environmental action. In June, the United Nations will declare a [Decade of Ecosystem Restoration](#) with the aim

of preventing, stopping and reversing environmental degradation “on every continent and in every ocean”. The 2020s will also be the [UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development](#). The Aichi biodiversity targets – which were set in 2010 and expired with a whimper last month, with none of the 20 goals fully achieved – will be updated and rebooted.

On the climate front, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is expected to release its latest scientific assessment in July, which can only strengthen the scientific case for urgent action. November will usher in the postponed COP26 climate summit, at which that action should materialise in the form of even more ambitious national carbon pledges.

We will be covering these developments as they happen, and we will try not to reach for the last-chance-saloon narrative. We promise.