

Clear and present danger

The Maldives emits so little CO₂ that it rounds down to '0 per cent' of the world's total, but this low-lying archipelago of 1,190 coral islands is among the world's nations most vulnerable to global warming: it would become uninhabitable if sea levels rose by less than a single metre. Faced with such an impending crisis, many would start looking for somewhere to run.

MALDIVES PRESIDENT MOHAMED NASHEED – who, at 42, is one of the world's youngest leaders – is not just standing his ground, but challenging nations around the world by pledging to make his country carbon-neutral by 2019.

The Maldives is not the first country to announce such an ambition: Costa Rica, Iceland, Monaco, New Zealand, Niue and Norway also have plans. But, if successful, it will be the first to achieve it. Its strategy requires a combination of 155 1.5 MW wind turbines, half a square kilometre of solar panels and a biomass plant that will burn coconut husks. Extra power will be stored in batteries for back-up. This renewable electricity will also power all the islands' vehicles, including watercraft, while the nation will offset emissions from aviation by purchasing European Union emissions trading certificates and destroying them. It will cost the Maldives \$110 million a year to implement its plan, but the island nation will start recouping its investment within 10 years.



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You've had positive reactions to your announcement worldwide. How have people back home received the news?

President Nasheed: Since announcing the carbon neutrality goal a little over two months ago, the Maldives has witnessed something of an environmental enlightenment. Maldivians are discussing and debating the environment far more than they used to. The media features environmental stories more regularly than before and civil society groups are raising awareness about the importance of protecting the environment.

For World Environment Day on 5 June, the Maldives held a children's festival in which children could voice their concerns over the environment. This is just one example of the many public activities that are now taking

place in the Maldives. These sorts of events are important because only with the help of local people can the country make a success of its environmental policies.

Why does the Maldives want to be the world's first country to go carbon neutral when the islands will be among the first to be affected by sea-level rise? Why aren't you devoting your efforts toward adaptation or evacuation instead?

President Nasheed: The average height of the Maldives is a mere 1.5 metres above sea level. And so we are very vulnerable to climate change and rising sea levels. Scientists warn that sea levels could rise by a metre this century. For the Maldives, climate change is no vague or distant irritation,

but a clear and present danger to our existence.

Maldivians have lived in the Maldives for thousands of years. And we don't want to trade in paradise for an environmental refugee camp. For these reasons, we are investing money in improving the sea defences around our islands – building water breakers, sea walls and revetments as well as ensuring we protect our coral reefs as best we can. Last year, the Government warned that future generations of Maldivians may have to seek a new homeland if nothing is done to stop the carbon pollution that is driving global warming.

It is not too late to save the Maldives. If the world wakes up to the climate crisis and makes a real commitment to combating carbon emissions, the Maldives can enjoy a future in the

22nd century. Nations must agree to a tough, binding agreement drastically to cut greenhouse gas emissions at the United Nations Climate Conference in Copenhagen this December. Nothing could be more important because climate change not only threatens the Maldives, it threatens us all. The Maldives is a front-line country in the climate change battle. But history shows us that if you can't protect the front line, the battle will soon be lost. If the world can't save the Maldives, tipping points might push climate change beyond man's control.

How can the efforts of a tiny country like yours be adapted to large, rich countries?



President Nasheed: The Maldives is a small country. And our contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions is negligible, at less than 0.1 per cent. We have not been part of the climate change problem. But we are determined to be part of the solution.

We believe that the Maldives can lead the world by example. That is why the Government announced in March this year that the Maldives will become the world's first carbon-neutral country within a decade.

It will not be easy to make the Maldives carbon neutral. Generating renewable energy through solar and wind doesn't come cheap, particularly in a country where the population is scattered across far-flung islands. But going carbon neutral is possible and where there is political will, there is a way.

I hope the Maldives' carbon-neutral example will help persuade other countries to follow suit. By successfully decarbonizing our local economy, the Maldives can demonstrate that going green is not only possible but also profitable.

I also hope our example can inspire concerned citizens and activists in other countries to lobby their governments for greater cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. If a relatively poor developing country like the Maldives can go carbon neutral, what excuse can wealthy nations have for refusing to do the same?

You are hoping that a carbon-neutral Maldives will draw more eco-tourists to the islands, but won't that cause more carbon emissions?

President Nasheed: Our carbon-neutral plan envisages the total decarbonization of the Maldivian economy. We will stop burning fossil fuels and instead generate power with the raw materials the Maldives has in abundance: the sun, the sea and the wind. We are harnessing pyrolysis technology to dispose of our waste in environmentally friendly ways. And we hope to gradually replace petrol and diesel boat and car engines with green technology.

Aviation is trickier. Wide-bodied commercial aeroplanes need kerosene to fly. Until someone invents bio-kerosene, aircrafts will continue to burn fossil fuels. The Maldivian economy is, and will continue to be, heavily dependent on tourism. The vast majority of holiday-makers come from Europe and East Asia, so reducing the number of flights to and from the Maldives would be devastating for our economy and our people.

Going carbon neutral does not mean your country never produces any CO₂ emissions. What it means is that you are not a net contributor to global CO₂ emissions. In effect, the country does not emit more CO₂ than it absorbs. In order to ensure that the Maldives becomes carbon neutral, we'll need to offset the greenhouse gas emissions produced by aircraft flying here. One option under consideration is for the Maldives to enter the European carbon trading certificates market and buy permits to pollute. If we buy

these permits, this means that European polluters, such as factories and cement works, will have to pollute less. By entering into this scheme, the pollution caused by tourists travelling to the Maldives can be offset by European polluters emitting fewer greenhouse gas emissions.

What are your first practical steps towards going carbon neutral? How long will it be before you achieve your first milestones?

President Nasheed: We have set out a vision for the country, based on an initial eco-plan drawn up by climate and energy experts Mark Lynas and Chris Goodall. We need to turn that vision into a carbon-neutral reality. In April, we established a Presidential Advisory Council on Climate Change, made up of 15 environment and energy experts, who will provide the Government with advice on how to reach the carbon-neutral target. This expertise will help us draw up a detailed roadmap for reaching carbon neutrality in 10 years.

The Maldives is also pressing ahead with numerous environmental projects and reforms. For instance, the Government intends to privatize the state-run electricity firm STELCO, and we are looking for international companies with experience in renewable energy production to bid for the contract. A \$10 million photovoltaic solar panel project is currently being implemented in and around the capital city of Malé and a local firm is developing concentrated solar power in island communities. Technology companies are researching the potential use of wind power, and investors are experimenting with biochar to help dispose of waste and allow Maldivians to grow more local produce.

We are also working hard to protect our marine life. In March, the Government banned shark hunting. Earlier this month, we created three marine protected areas to preserve whale sharks and manta rays.

We are determined to reach our carbon-neutrality target. Some people might say, because the Maldives is a small country, that our efforts are a mere drop in the ocean. But I hope our example creates a ripple of hope that forms a current of change, to protect this planet for all our grandchildren.