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Climate Forward

When Climate Change Hits Home

A dispatch from the flooded house of our new lead writer.



By David Gelles

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You're reading the Climate Forward newsletter, for Times subscribers only. News and insights for a warming world. Get it in your inbox.

Even if you've been paying attention to climate change, it can sometimes feel very far away, distant in both space and time. But on Sunday night, as I was writing my first edition of this newsletter, it came roaring into my kitchen.

I was with my family at our 100-year-old cabin in the Hudson Valley, north of New York City. It had been pouring for 14 hours, and our ceiling started leaking. Then, around midnight, a wall of water flooded the house.

Many of my neighbors fared even worse. One woman died and dozens had to be rescued as a slow-moving storm system produced widespread flooding in New York State and New England.

We know that man-made climate change is making extreme weather like this more severe. Warmer temperatures enable air to hold more moisture, which leads to more intense rainfall and flooding.

On Monday, the New York governor said such climate-fueled disasters were “the new normal.” In general, the United States is nowhere close to ready for the threat of

catastrophic flooding, especially in areas far from rivers and coastlines.

On the other side of the country, much of the Southwest is baking under a heat dome. Major cities have been choking on smoke from Canadian wildfires for a month now. Off the coast of Florida, ocean temperatures are reaching into the mid-90s Fahrenheit.



June heat in Phoenix. Temperatures are expected to be above 110 degrees Fahrenheit (or above 43 degrees Celsius) again this week. Caitlin O'Hara/Getty Images

This is not just about millions of Americans, of course, but billions of people around the globe. Over the weekend, Delhi recorded its wettest July day in 40 years, Beijing residents flocked to underground air raid shelters to escape the heat, and floods carried away cars in Spain.

The planet is entering a multiyear period of exceptional warmth, scientists say. Greenhouse gas emissions, mostly from the burning of fossil fuels, have already heated the Earth by an average of 1.2 degrees Celsius (or 2.2 degrees Fahrenheit) compared with preindustrial levels. Now a powerful El Niño system in the Pacific Ocean is releasing a torrent of heat into the atmosphere. The warmest days in modern history occurred this month. That all sets the stage for more damaging heat waves, floods, droughts, wildfires and hurricanes.

Yesterday, as I spoke with climate scientists for a story about the storm that walloped my house, they all sounded the alarm about what was coming in the months ahead.

“We are going to see stuff happen this year around Earth that we have not seen in modern history,” one meteorologist told me. “It will be astonishing.”

Abnormal as the 'new normal'

Each of these anomalies creates new risks, threatening human health and biodiversity. Yet with disasters piling up and headlines blurring together, there is another profoundly dangerous risk: apathy.

As temperature records break and extreme weather becomes commonplace, the abnormal can begin to seem ordinary. That's an all-too human reaction to adversity. We're masters of adaptation, and can learn to endure even the most uncomfortable situations.

But in this case, indifference would be the biggest disaster of them all. **Growing inured to the signs of a planet on fire would do more than blind us to the damage we've already done. It would also delay critical action at a crucial juncture.**

Because as bad as things are, there are still real causes for optimism.

After decades of inaction, a monumental effort is finally underway to confront climate change. Wind turbines and solar panels are rapidly displacing fossil fuels. **Sales of**

electric vehicles, heat pumps and induction stoves are soaring. Across government, business and civil society, there is a concerted, coordinated push to reduce emissions, protect nature and help humans adapt to a hotter planet.



Ryan David Brown for The New York Times

The grand project to decarbonize the world economy can be seen as the biggest collective action in human history. On the agenda is nothing less than the remaking of the world's entire energy and transportation systems, not to

mention vast overhauls of the building blocks of modern life. And it all needs to happen with a pants-on-fire urgency as the planet heats up.

That may seem daunting, and it is. Progress is not happening nearly fast enough, and many obstacles remain. But it's also the opportunity of a lifetime. Should we succeed, we'll be creating a world with better air quality, more green space, healthier ecosystems and less waste.

It's a head-spinning moment, one that requires us to honor two seemingly contradictory truths at the same time.

Yes, the fragile ecosystem that sustains human life is in trouble.

And also yes, we have many of the tools needed to get ourselves out of this mess.