

As bad as this summer has been, it may get worse for the rest of our lives



Ash Ponders / The New York Times

The sunset over Phoenix tinted by smoke from nearby wildfires on Tuesday, June 15, 2021, when temperatures climbed to 118 degrees. Much of the West is suffering from unusually scorching temperatures this week, as a large and persistent heat dome stretches from Southern California to Montana.

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To those who deny climate change or who understand that global warming is real but are resistant to taking long-range

action, here's a message at the start of a new-normal August in the American West.

Enjoy this summer, because despite the baking heat, it's the coolest one you'll have for the rest of your lives. Enjoy it because despite wildfires so intense they create their own weather and have sent plumes of smoke as far as New York City, this is the easiest fire season you'll experience for the rest of your lives. Enjoy the summer because despite the dwindling water supplies that have put Lake Mead on the verge of a historic water shortage declaration, this is the most water you'll see for the rest of your lives.

The impacts of climate change go on and on.

Despite the severe weather here and around the globe — 500-year floods happening on a routine basis, ferocious hurricanes and typhoons, record-shattering heat events, cold snaps happening in unexpected places due to shifts in weather patterns, etc. — the climate is milder today than it will be for the rest of our lives minus aggressive action to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

Despite the high prices of groceries due to pandemic issues, food is cheaper than it will be in the future as agriculture struggles with drought and destructive weather.

Climate projections bear all of this out. Oh, there will be

exceptions — the effects will be worse in some areas than others, and places will experience periods of normal weather.

But human-generated climate change is not an abstraction. It isn't coming sometime in the future, it's occurring in real time before our eyes. And without an urgent response, it will get worse every year for the remainder of our lives, our children's lives, our grandchildren's lives.

So live it up if you reside in a seaside community, because rising seas soon may cause flooding during high tide (as is happening now in Miami). If your home is in a low-lying area in an inland watershed, enjoy it while you can as record floods become the new norm due to intensifying storm patterns.

Enjoy the summer if you're a farmer, because despite crippling water shortages that are sending the West's ag industry reeling, this is the best farming season you'll have for the rest of your life. That's particularly the case in California, where dairy farmers and ranchers are selling off their animals at a rate rarely seen, as pastures have dried up and feed prices have shot through the roof. Elsewhere, grain fields have dried up and fruit and nut orchards have been shut down due to lack of water. Meanwhile, due to shortages in the surface-water irrigation system, California farmers are expected to pump an additional 6 million to 7 million acre-

feet of water from aquifers — enough to cover 10,000 square miles with a foot of water. That amount greatly exceeds what can be naturally replenished in the wells in a year, even one with normal rainfall. “In short, California’s \$50 billion-a-year farm economy is turning nightmarish,” The Fresno Bee reported.

The real-time effects of climate change are hitting virtually everywhere.

If you like boating, enjoy Western lakes this summer. Yes, Lake Mead and Lake Powell are at historically low levels, which has forced the closure of boat ramps and resulted in the loss of miles upon miles of surface area for boating, but there will never be better access or more room to roam than there is now. Fast fact: Only one of the seven boat ramps at Lake Powell is reliably functional this summer, and it may close soon.

If you like fishing, enjoy the West’s streams and rivers this summer, because there may never be more fish than there are now. Drought, higher temperatures, development and other stressors have led to drastically low river levels and fish die-offs; in Montana, fly fishing guides and environmentalists are sounding an alarm that the state’s trout fisheries will soon collapse.

Do you like hiking among the trees and desert plants in

natural areas? Do it now, because despite massive die-offs that have already been brought on by fires and lack of water, you won't see a greater abundance of natural flora for the rest of your life. The bleak outlook for wild flora includes more losses from wildfires and prolonged drought leaving plants more vulnerable to pests and competition from invasive plants.

If you like getting outside to marvel at wildlife, do that now too. Even though desert animal populations have been thinned by drought or because of climate-related migrations, your chances of coming across wildlife are better than they will be for the rest of your life. In a sign of more things to come, this year's extreme drought conditions forced Southern Nevada wildlife officials to take the extremely rare step of airlifting water to fill guzzlers in remote areas — tanks that provide water for desert bighorn sheep, kit foxes, wild burros and other animals.

This is just a sampling of the climate-driven changes that are happening in a steadily quickening cadence. One minute we're hearing news that rural communities are running out of water, the next we learn that the Great Salt Lake has dropped to its lowest level since record-keeping began in 1837, the next it's reported that wildfires have consumed four times more acreage this year in California than were torched in 2020 — which was a record year there — the next

comes word that hundreds of wells have gone dry in the Klamath River basin in Oregon amid unprecedented water shortages there.

Oh, and did we mention that thieves are stealing water in California to the tune of billions of gallons, and that more than 2,000 wells have failed there? People who lose their water wonder where to go, but where do you turn when areas are going dry all around you?

The drumbeat thumps away. Faster, faster, faster.

All of which begs a closing question.

Are we complacent with this being the best summer of the rest of our lives, or is this the year when we wake up and aggressively move to make future summers better than this one?