NEWS

Dahr Jamail | Mourning the Changes That Surround Us: Readers Speak Out on Climate

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BY
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PUBLISHED
July 20, 2015

PART OF THE SERIES
Planet or Profit

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Footage from the Carlton Complex wildfire in north and central Washington State. The fire burned for more than 10 days before it could be quelled by firefighters and rain. (Photo: Wildfire via Shutterstock)

In early July, I asked Truthout readers to share the weather anomalies they are witnessing on their home turf. Large numbers of readers

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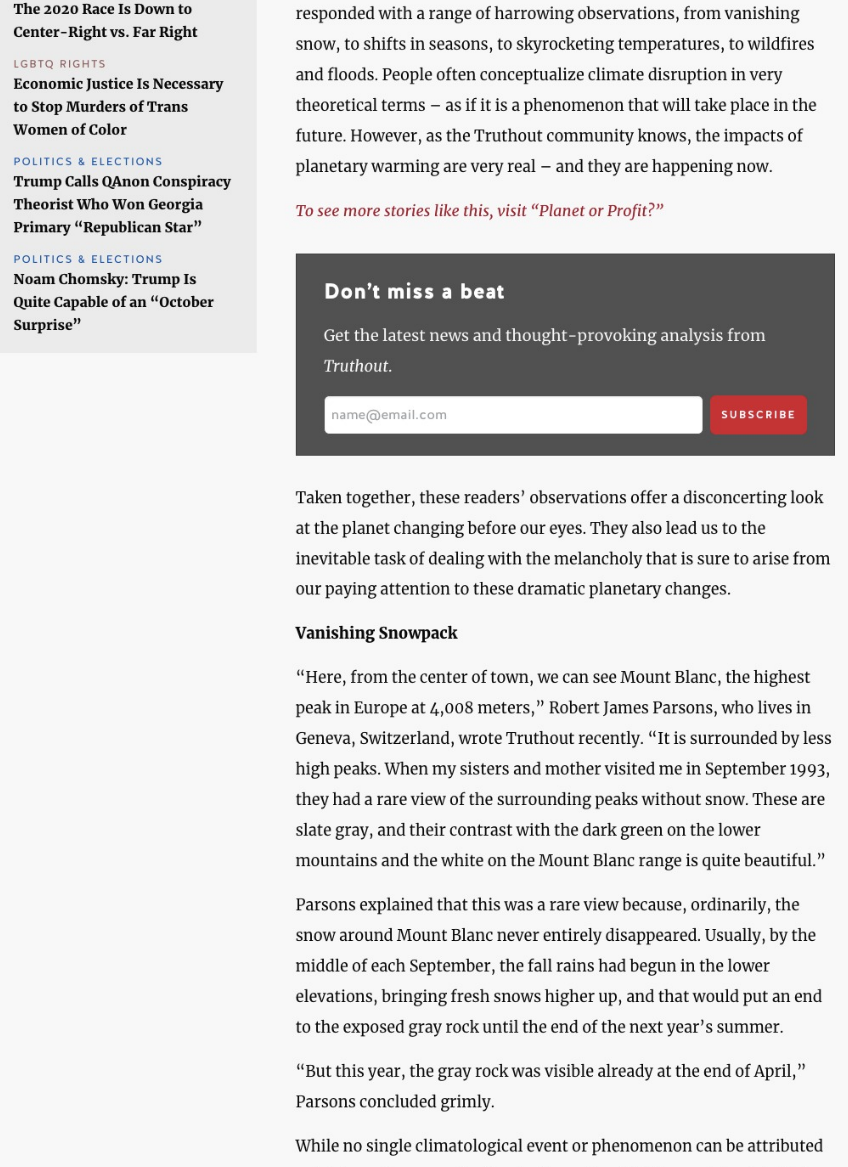

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responded with a range of harrowing observations, from vanishing snow, to shifts in seasons, to skyrocketing temperatures, to wildfires and floods. People often conceptualize climate disruption in very theoretical terms – as if it is a phenomenon that will take place in the future. However, as the Truthout community knows, the impacts of planetary warming are very real – and they are happening now.

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Taken together, these readers' observations offer a disconcerting look at the planet changing before our eyes. They also lead us to the inevitable task of dealing with the melancholy that is sure to arise from our paying attention to these dramatic planetary changes.

Vanishing Snowpack

"Here, from the center of town, we can see Mount Blanc, the highest peak in Europe at 4,008 meters," Robert James Parsons, who lives in Geneva, Switzerland, wrote Truthout recently. "It is surrounded by less high peaks. When my sisters and mother visited me in September 1993, they had a rare view of the surrounding peaks without snow. These are slate gray, and their contrast with the dark green on the lower mountains and the white on the Mount Blanc range is quite beautiful."

Parsons explained that this was a rare view because, ordinarily, the snow around Mount Blanc never entirely disappeared. Usually, by the middle of each September, the fall rains had begun in the lower elevations, bringing fresh snows higher up, and that would put an end to the exposed gray rock until the end of the next year's summer.

"But this year, the gray rock was visible already at the end of April," Parsons concluded grimly.

While no single climatological event or phenomenon can be attributed solely to anthropogenic climate disruption (ACD), consistent shifts in weather patterns, along with increasing frequency and intensification of events or phenomena, are being tied directly to ACD.

For example, Parson’s story evidences the scientific fact that ACD is literally shifting the timing of the seasons.

Gordon Glick has lived in Bremerton, Washington, nearby the Olympic Mountains in Olympic National Park since 1978.

“Bremerton is due east of the Olympic range, particularly the mountains called ‘The Brothers,’ which are visible from several vantage points around town and environs,” he wrote.

“These days, the snow pack and the glaciers are almost gone by the middle of June.”

“I’m a born New York City boy, and have always marveled at my good fortune in winding up here in the Northwest. When I first arrived, I was thrilled to see that the upper reaches of the Olympics were snow-capped all year long. Yes, the glaciers and snowpack melted and receded, and by August, would be at about their minimum. In September, the weather would change up on the peaks, and before you knew it, the sunrise would reveal the eastern flanks covered with brilliant, glittering snow, while down here at sea level, it would still be sunny and warm, soon to turn the gray of a Northwest autumn and winter. On clear days one could look up and see the peaks mantled in white.”

But things have changed dramatically.

“These days, the snow pack and the glaciers are almost gone by the middle of June,” Glick continued. “By August, you can’t tell they were ever covered in snow and ice. The heat at sea level has become very oppressive, and without the inspiring view of the frozen summits, which seemed to offer respite for a thirsty and sweaty shipyard worker, it feels even hotter. Summer temperatures in the 90s have been common the past few years, and the haze obscures the peaks on some days.”

As I pen this piece, entire eastern flanks of the Olympic Peninsula remain, as they have for several days in a row now, shrouded thickly in smoke from hundreds of Canadian wildfires, as well as a burning rainforest in southeastern Olympic National Park.

A 2012 Stanford University study, "Northern Hemisphere Snowpack Likely to Shrink Faster," speaks directly to the phenomenon Glick is witnessing. The study cites the fact that water supplies throughout the western United States will most certainly decline dramatically due to faster than expected changes in less annual snowfall amounts.

Molly Brown, who lives near Mount Shasta in California, wrote about how that mountain had almost no snowfall through this last winter – after multiple years of more than five feet of snow accumulations.

"[This year] we didn't have to lift one shovelful," she said. "The previous winter had only one significant snow storm; this year, only two small storms. Then it was so warm that our peach trees blossomed too early for the pollinators to arrive, so almost no fruit set. And then of course a later freeze finished off any fruit that had managed to make."

"A tomato I planted in late April is already turning red and it's just the first week of July."

Mitch Clogg, who wrote from Mendocino, California, echoed Brown's observations.

"I've had a place in Trinity Mountains since 2000 beneath Trinity Alps in northern California," he wrote. "An older long-term neighbor was the first one to tell me the snowpack had been melting earlier and there used to be snow until end of June. This year it ended by end of May."

He added, "Mount Shasta in mid-June looks like end of August. The northern and western sides are very bare."

Clogg also wrote of his experience witnessing the mega-drought in his state, which has, via numerous studies, been linked directly to ACD. He wrote that, by the end of April, "It was the driest … I had ever seen the earth and trees. A lot of small cedar trees in [the] front and back of my place had died. The Trinity River is slightly above my ankle. There are no ripples; it is more like a lake. When I left Trinity Lake on June 14, it had already receded to [the] point where it was last fall."

Shifting Seasons

In Portland, Oregon, Val Eisman wrote of how blueberries and zucchinis were ripening three weeks earlier than they normally would.

"A tomato I planted in late April is already turning red and it's just the first week of July," he wrote.

Patricia Sanders, writing from east central Arizona, said that at the farm where she used to live the apricots ripened six weeks early this year.

"Also, there are Eurasian collared doves in abundance – never seen before at the farm (the farmer's been there 35 years)," she added.

Folks in Montana are seeing some big changes as well.

"Here in Missoula, we are having incredibly hot and dry weather very early in the year," wrote Tamara Kittelson-Aldred. "For years, I have noticed that my garden is earlier developing and two years ago we were officially reclassified Zone 5 by the USDA, instead of Zone 4." She is referring to US Department of Agriculture-designated "plant hardiness" zones, which essentially categorize locations by how well plants grow there. Large numbers of plant hardiness zones across the United States are now in the process of being redesignated.

"Conditions here feel about six weeks ahead of schedule … the rivers are really low – about seven feet or so below normal."

Kittelson-Aldred is witnessing dramatic changes in Missoula: "This year, for the first time, my rain barrels never have filled up. We have had virtually no rain in April, May or June. At the same time, we have been in a Stage 1 fire danger alert since June. This never usually happens until late July or August. My Nanking cherries are all done as of two weeks ago and they used to ripen in July. And we have cherries and raspberries several weeks early. How can anyone say things are not changing?"

Over in Prescott, Arizona, Terry Wofford is also witnessing sharp changes in plant growth.

"I have lived in different parts of Arizona for the last 40 years," she told Truthout. "All those years I have had thriving geraniums and other plants in pots, regardless of season or altitude. Now, for the last three years or so, there have been relentless caterpillar attacks virtually destroying them. Also, aphid infestations on all my deck plants, vegetables and even aspen tree, whereas in the past it was only roses affected and only for a short time."

Stephen Rioux wrote from Ontario, Canada, where he lives on the shores of Georgian Bay. Although some people may assume that temperatures are increasing across the board this summer, Rioux points to the complexity of shifts in weather: In some places, this summer is unusually cool.

"It's been interesting to see how the melting Arctic ice is changing our weather patterns, for as warm as it is where you are [Olympic Peninsula] and right up into Alaska, we are experiencing much cooler than normal temperatures here in Ontario," Rioux wrote of the disruptions he is witnessing. "In fact, today (Canada Day, July 1) where I live, the high is only 15 degrees Celsius (59 degrees Fahrenheit), about 10 degrees Celsius below the average for this time of year. So we have these extremes occurring. Of course, all this cooler weather here has meant some of the lesser informed are saying how this proves *'there is no such thing as ACD,'* never understanding that record warm temperatures are being recorded all over the planet or how ACD actually works. Fools!"

Colin Ball wrote from Clare Valley, Australia, where, he says, "signs of chaotic change abound."

"Where I live, almond trees are amongst the first, along with some native acacias, to blossom," Ball wrote. "This used to be in mid- to late August (winter here). I've watched over the past decade or so as this blossoming has occurred earlier in the season, from early August to late July, mid-July, early July, until this year 2015, I was astounded to see buds burst on my property on June 28!"

Record high temperatures, perhaps the most obvious sign of our climate-disrupted planet, have long been linked to ACD.

He added that by early July they experienced a prolonged warming period during which one day reached 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit), despite that usually being, traditionally, the coldest part of the year there.

"This prolonged warm patch induced an apple tree to an early blossom with one particular blossom commencing to form an apple about the size of a grape," Ball wrote. "When winter returned a week or so later, the blossoming stopped and the little apple desiccated but remained on the tree as a sad indictment of its misled promise. When frosts came due to rainless and cloudless skies in late July/August all the almond and apple blossoms died. The result – no fruit in summer."

Shawn Taylor, the executive producer for "The Thom Hartmann Program," wrote about her observations from Portland, Oregon:

> I am not liking the hot summer we've been dealt in the Pacific Northwest this year. Portland has been too hot with higher than normal [temperatures] and humidity. We have no snow on our mountains either … Mt. Hood has a little on the highest peak and Mt. St. Helen's had barely a dusting last weekend … it's probably gone by now too … Conditions here feel about six weeks ahead of schedule … the rivers are really low – about seven feet or so below normal (I live on a floating home so that is always a little scary); fruit that usually isn't ripe until August is just about ready to pick now and the pond near my house is drying up now vs. mid-August.

Taylor also mentioned that the heat in Portland had been relentless, and a large number of creeks were now completely dry. She described it as "really disturbing," and said that the local government in her area had yet to place any restrictions on water use.

"I don't think anyone wants to admit we've 'suddenly' become California," she concluded.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) lists shifting seasons as an indicator of ACD. The world over, these shifts are taking an alarming cumulative toll on food and water availability and agricultural production (usually causing it to decline), and having negative impacts on insect and animal species.

Record Temperatures

Like Taylor, Jessica Sweeney lives in Portland, Oregon, which she describes as "a part of the country that is historically wet and mild throughout the majority of the year." However, Sweeney said, "That started changing a decade or so ago. Right now, we are experiencing the craziest stretch of hot weather I have ever experienced (and I am a lifelong Oregonian)."

Val Eisman, also a Portland resident, described the city's record temperatures: "We have had almost three weeks of 90s degree weather in Portland. Usually during our hot weather it gets down to the high 70s by 9 pm. Now it's in the low 80s at 10 pm."

Sweeney said temperatures in Portland had ranged from the high 80s to the low 100s "for so many days – without any signs of precipitation, not even a cloud in the sky – that I can't recall when they started. It feels like desert heat, the kind you experience in central Oregon and California, and as far as I know has never happened in Portland before."

Record high temperatures, perhaps the most obvious sign of our climate-disrupted planet, have long been linked to ACD.

Sweeney also mentioned how Pacific Northwest salmon are dying from the unusually warm river water.

Another observation from the Pacific Northwest came from Ian Cameron, in Camas, Washington. He too mentioned the incredible heat and lack of rainfall in the region, and said, "11 of the last 12 months have been warmer than average and six of those 11 months were heat records. But this June and July it has been unbelievable and actually sincerely concerning as our well already has a low flow/refill rate."

Cameron went on to share his concerns about the future – a future in which the western United States is likely to continue growing hotter and drier.

"I'm no expert but I predict that in the near future (10-15 years) we are going to see private wells dry up across the West, maybe in the thousands or hundreds of thousands," he wrote. "People won't be able to live in (long term at least) or sell their homes resulting in massive debt, widespread economic disruption, migration to areas with water and the subsequent increased depletion rate of those water resources."

David Kirsh, from Durham, North Carolina, wrote to share an experience he had in Jamaica. “I’m a lifelong shell collector and I’ve had the opportunity to vacation twice in the southwest corner of Jamaica called Treasure Beach (St. Elizabeth’s Parish), once in December 2013 and again this March,” he wrote.

Kirsh noticed that a place called “Great Pond” in Jamaica was only one-quarter to one-third full on his first trip, and he decided to explore the area for aquatic snails on his second trip.

“When we returned, I saw that it was completely dry,” he said. “The owner of the guesthouse where I stayed told me that it had been dry before but this is the longest time it’s been dry (perhaps eight months or more). Great Pond was the largest fresh body of water in Jamaica and was somewhat unique in its being so close to ocean water yet low salinity … It was a place where local Jamaicans used to fish and swim and boat (I don’t know how recently).”

Now, Kirsh wrote, the pond is a site of death. “I found the biggest single assemblage of shells I’ve ever seen in my lifetime at Great Pond – all dead,” he wrote. “Most of the shells I found on the surface of the dried mud are non-native and were introduced within the last 20 years, going by the records in a previous study. Admittedly without complete information, it seemed to me like a small habitat meant to be a canary in the coal mine.”

Another story about increasing temperatures came from Michael Gary, who wrote of his childhood home. It’s worth publishing in full:

> In 1968, our family moved from Detroit, Michigan, to Westerville, Ohio, just north of Columbus.
>
> In the winter months I would spend hours ice skating on Alumn Creek, along with hundreds of other members of our community. Year after year, without any interruption.
>
> Decades went by before I found myself planning a trip back to that area and wanted to go ice skating again, as I had once enjoyed so much. In preparation I called the city office and inquired about how to learn about any planned activities. I was informed that the last time the creek had frozen was at

> least 20 years ago.
>
> Global warming? I can't say one way or another.
>
> All I can say is that that creek froze year after year and I have seen photos of ice skating there dating back 100 years or so
>
> …
>
> but it no longer does.
>
> Ever.

Wildfires

Record wildfires abound, thanks to ACD. It is a scientific fact that there is now a greater frequency of wildfires, they are larger and hotter, and wildfire season is expanding dramatically, all due to ACD.

Thus far in 2015 alone, a staggering 3 million acres have burned in Alaska, and well over 5 million in Canada.

"It is the hottest and driest year in British Columbia that I have ever seen," wrote Ellen Rainwalker, from Vancouver Island. "Sixty-four temperature records were broken in June. A lot of our rivers are fed from snowmelt but this year there was hardly any snow so the water in the rivers is very low. Lots of people's wells have already run dry and it is only early July."

She mentioned that while her area does sometimes have dry summers, this was the first time she was aware of that there have been such dramatic water shortages this early in the summer, "and I've lived here for a long time," she said.

A recent local news report from her area underscored Rainwalker's points, with a story on how the British Columbia government banned angling from over a dozen streams and rivers on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands because of low stream flows and warming water temperatures. Her province has also increased the drought rating for both of those areas to its highest level, and imposed new restrictions to protect what is left in the aquifers.

Another Canadian, Richard Miller from Salt Spring Island in British Columbia, also wrote to me about the wildfires and heat there.

"Fire is a major concern on this treed island and evacuation plans are in place," he said. "Our crops are about a month early and many people on the island have dry wells. The regional government has banned new developments that draw water from stressed sources."

Miller also reported on another anomaly: "lots of sightings of large sea animals in places they usually don't show themselves, perhaps as a result ocean temperature change."

Rising Sea Levels

Another glaringly obvious sign are rising sea levels, which science long ago linked to ACD.

Everett Wohlers is a consultant who works in developing countries, and a few years ago worked on a job in the Marshall Islands, where he observed something that troubled him greatly.

"When the US moved the Bikini islanders off Bikini to use it as the site for the H-bomb tests in the 1950s, they were resettled on Majuro, the atoll where the capital is located," Wohlers wrote. "As part of the compensation package, the US built a high-quality paved road around the atoll, including through the capital."

According to Wohlers, at the time the road was built, it was safely dry as it was well above the high-tide mark, even in stormy weather.

But things have changed.

"Now, at high tide, water routinely flows across the road just outside the hotel in which I stayed in the capital, even on perfectly calm days," Wohlers wrote. "If you are not familiar with the Marshalls and the next island country to it, Kiribati, the maximum natural elevation on those atolls is about six feet, so it is only a matter of time until they become uninhabitable and eventually disappear, as did one of the Maldives islands a couple of years ago."

Environmental Melancholia

While some people who wrote to Truthout about their environmental observations have spoken overtly about their exasperation, frustration and even fear, there is an even deeper emotional current surrounding the issue of climate disruption – and it is affecting all of us, whether we are conscious of it or not.

Regan Rosburg is a professional artist who is finishing her master's thesis that explores the connection between grief, symbolism, environmental melancholia and mania. I was already well acquainted with Rosburg's work, but she contacted me after I put out the call to Truthout readers.

Her perspective on what each of us is witnessing as the planet degrades is thus: "These are the personal mini deaths that, to me, are an entrance point for people to experience their own grief regarding environmental melancholia."

Her thesis, which will be completed and fully online this November, will serve as both artwork and resource for those of us struggling to cope emotionally with the climate crisis, delving into the issue of what planetary death is doing to our psyches.

Rosburg continued:

> A mini death is a death that is part of the larger ecological collapse story, but is close enough for someone to experience directly (in a way that resembles healthy mourning). For example, someone might see bees disappear from his yard, or she might experience a drought-related forest fire, or flooding. The person is having a *direct experience* with this death. Furthermore, his processing of the grief for this death is proportional to how much she directly engages her feelings and awareness towards the loss.

Rosburg explained that in contrast, the major deaths we witness, like the Larsen Ice Shelf in Antarctica collapsing, or Chris Jordan's photographs of plastic-filled albatross who feed in the open ocean, or even California's record-breaking megadrought, remain "more indirect, abstract and overlapping."

Rosburg sees these "major" deaths as being "too massive for the human mind to fully comprehend," on top of the fact that we are all already desensitized by "a constant stream of small television, radio and social media sound bites, which further depersonalize these stories of massive losses around the world."

Thus, we are left with, according to Rosburg, "no time to grieve; no symbolic ritual [is] in place, and [there is] no body to bury." In other words, there is no real precedent for carrying out this kind of mourning.

"Thus, these notions of collapse are abstracted; they cannot be personalized, nor properly mourned," Rosburg said. "Instead, the recurrent state of un-mournable deaths gives way to environmental melancholia."

A G. Hanlon wrote me from California, and shared several examples of collapsing natural systems around him, including the drought, wildfires and chronically higher temperatures. He ended his email by sharing a deeply personal experience that speaks directly to the concept of "environmental melancholia":

> Until I read your interview ["Mass Extinction: It's the End of the World as We Know It"], I was very much aware of climate change, of threats it posed to living entities … etc … but I lacked a sense of its immediacy. After reading it, I looked at an image I had taken of a friend's daughter (16 years of age) participating in a race on July 4 at Mt. Shasta. As she ran past me, she flashed a natural, fabulously beautiful smile. I thought of her future (and others) but hers was deeply personal. I wept uncontrollably for sometime afterwards (10-20 minutes). Shopping today I paid attention to all those unknown people of all ages and asked myself "how can we allow this (extinction) to happen? I lack the words beyond sadness, sorrow … to express my feelings about these passing. None of those people (and millions and billions like them) deserve a potential fate of a hell on earth in two to three decades and their horrid deaths that will follow.

Rosburg sees the solution, at least emotionally, as allowing ourselves to dive headfirst into the emotions that are elicited each time we witness a mini-death, so as to render ourselves more capable of fathoming the broader collapse that is taking place across the planet.

"If someone can acknowledge the pain and ambivalence that comes with a mini-death, then that person can extend that awareness to the larger ecological collapse," Rosburg said.

Given that the numbers of both mini- and major-ecological deaths are mounting on a daily basis, we would all do well to heed Rosburg's suggestion.

Meanwhile, I want to say thank you to the Truthout community for contributing to this piece with such enthusiasm and insight. The first step to wrestling with the calamity of climate disruption is to acknowledge it. Your observations mark a path forward, toward awareness – and, hopefully, healing.

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Dahr Jamail

Dahr Jamail, a *Truthout* contributing writer, Board of Advisers member and former staff reporter, is the author of *The End of Ice: Bearing Witness and Finding Meaning in the Path of Climate Disruption* (The New Press, 2019), *The Will to Resist: Soldiers Who Refuse to Fight in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Haymarket Books, 2009), and *Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches From an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq* (Haymarket Books, 2007). Jamail reported from Iraq for more than a year, as well as from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Turkey over the last 10 years, and has won the Izzy Award and the Martha Gellhorn Award for Investigative Journalism, among other awards. His third book, *The Mass Destruction of Iraq: Why It Is Happening, and Who Is Responsible*, co-written with William Rivers Pitt, is available now on Amazon. He lives and works in Washington State.

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