

No, Climate Change Will Not End the World in 12 Years

Stoking panic and fear creates a false narrative that can overwhelm readers, leading to inaction and hopelessness.



Credit: Getty Images

“This is what I’m talking about,” the text from Rachel reads, with an attached image of *Time*’s latest cover story, entitled “Our Sinking Planet.” U.S. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stares back at me on the cover, nearly waist-deep in rising murky seas.

Rachel is a mom like I am. We both have small children and she’s part of the circle of friends I somehow manage to meet for lunch now and then between work deadlines and dance recitals. She’s anxious about climate change again, reaching out to me for reassurance.

I am concerned too, but it's different. There's no question that our climate reality is dire, but having worked at the intersection of science and climate challenges for decades, the new barrage of what I've come to call doomsday porn is perplexing.

Climate scientists, biologists, engineers and others with expertise have been speaking and writing about our changing planet for a long time. My own work has focused on how we'll figure out a way to come to terms with billions more people, limited resources and more extreme extremes. Droughts will be worse. Floods more severe. Storms increasingly intense.

I've often felt like a modern Cassandra, writing and speaking about the dramatic and unprecedented planetary shifts taking place due to short-sighted policy choices. Deforestation, the burning of fossil fuels, and the ways we use water and produce food inevitably do take a toll on the environment, our health and security. As a marine scientist, I observed firsthand how the pH of oceans has been changing along urban coasts in a process called acidification due to excess emissions.

The evidence of climate change has been all around us for a long time. Protecting people and Earth's co-inhabitants from its most devastating impacts will require institutional reckoning and action.

Massive social movements to organize, march and strike have collectively shone a light on growing public awareness and urgency. Candidates and policymakers, long reticent to mention climate change, are finally openly talking about it and developing detailed policy plans to address uncertainty and emerging related security challenges.

Scientists are already developing new ways to produce food in hotter, drier and wetter climates. The energy landscape has been rapidly transitioning and new technologies now allow us to be more efficient with water, waste less in agriculture and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Plant-based meat alternatives and cell-cultured meat are swiftly entering the global marketplace to have a less damaging environmental impact than their traditionally produced counterparts. We are preparing future generations for conditions on a changing planet, but the lack of public awareness, trust, and support of the research involved will hinder our progress.

Doomsday scenarios may generate clicks and sell advertisements, but they always fail to convey that science is nuanced. Arbitrary “time left to the apocalypse” predictions are not evidence-based and the story of climate change doesn’t fit neatly into brief bullet points competing for your attention in today’s saturated media environment. Stoking panic and fear offers a false narrative that can overwhelm readers, leading to inaction and hopelessness.

When I worked on Capitol Hill 13 years ago, I faced a cacophony of staffers and lawmakers choosing inaction on the assumption that climate change wasn’t real. Today many of the same people point to the dire predictions dominating the news and shrug off better policies with the excuse that the world is ending anyway.

If history teaches us anything, it’s that humans have a penchant for anticipating our End Times. Ancient mythologies from cultures all around the world describe catastrophic floods and religious cults continue to recruit followers with predictions of death by a comet or solar flare.

Climate change cannot become yet another doomsday narrative. It’s far too important and deadly serious. Climate change deserves to be addressed with a level of gravity that spurs informed policies, thoughtful planning and dedicated leadership at the local, national and global scale. Journalists must figure out how to convey the precarious state of our world along with the opportunities still available to adapt and change our behavior to mitigate the worst possible outcomes.

Earth isn’t ending in 12 years. It didn’t end at Y2K or when the Mayan calendar predicted the collapse of civilization in 2012. Earth, as a whole, will be okay—for at least another few billion years. What’s less settled is how humans and the rest of biodiversity on the planet will fare in the decades and centuries to come. That’s up to us and I hope we work to highlight hope over Armageddon.

Source:

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/no-climate-change-will-not-end-the-world-in-12-years/>

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