**Uninhabitable planet**

Bill McKibben

Wednesday, Aug 09, 2023

I’ve given a lot of talks about climate change over the years – that’s part of what organizers do. And I can predict with great confidence the questions that people will raise their hands to ask. “Isn’t the real problem overpopulation?” (Not really; most population growth is coming in places that use incredibly small amounts of energy.)

Or “what about nuclear?” (keep the plants we’ve got open if we safely can; new ones are incredibly slow and expensive to build, though someday a generation of yet newer ones could conceivably change that; in the meantime rely on the nuclear reactor hanging a safe 93 million miles up in the sky).

I can also predict the questions people will ask later, privately, as the crowd drifts out of the auditorium. One – “Is it OK for me to have a kid?” – is almost unbearably painful; no one should have to ask it. The other – “Where should I move?” – is a (little) less traumatizing.

And I think it’s on a lot of minds, especially right now, as it becomes clear that many parts of our Earth won’t be habitable going forward. As I tried to explain in a recent book, global heating is systematically shrinking the size of the board on which humans can play the game of life.

On the one hand, the question implies a certain self-centered approach to the climate crisis – how do I avoid this huge communal disaster – as well as a certain quanta of privilege: Most people in this world, especially the ones who really need a new home, lack the resources or the legal ability to pick up and move. Still, we each get one life and we need to live it somewhere.

It’s easier, actually, to figure out where not to live. Phoenix may be the fastest-growing big city in the country, but anyone who moves there after this summer is not paying attention: 31 straight days over 110 degrees F, and emergency rooms filled with people who burned themselves by… falling on the sidewalk. But it’s not just obvious places, like the middle of the desert.

Last week, at 4,000 feet in the Andes, the temperature topped 95 degrees F—in winter. (Weather historian Maximiliano Herrera described it as “one of the extreme events the world has ever seen.”) Or take Athens, one of those places we like to call a cradle of Western civilization, but two years ago the city’s ‘chief heat officer’ was already warning it might be becoming uninhabitable; last month, during the longest heatwave in the city’s history, authorities closed the Acropolis to tourists in the afternoons.

Even in places used to dealing with extremes, life is getting harder; India’s monsoon, for instance, is ever more ‘violent and unpredictable’. In Himachal Pradesh, for instance, “the state has already received 1,200 per cent more than its annual rainfall, according to data from the India Meteorological Department. Landslides and floods have claimed nearly 100 lives.”

I could muster these kinds of statistics for virtually any place you want to name: A recent study found that every time the temperature rises another tenth of a degree Celsius, another 140 million humans find themselves living outside what scientists call the ‘human climate niche’, the zone with temperatures where our species flourishes.

But as this summer – with the increase in global temperature at least temporarily topping the 1.5 degrees C that the world swore to avoid in Paris – demonstrates, no place is really safe, even within those supposedly habitable zones. I live in Vermont, in the mountains of the American northeast, which has sometimes been seen as a ‘climate haven’ because it’s at a high enough latitude to avoid the worst heatwaves, isolated from a stormy ocean coast, and historically wet.

But this summer we’ve had too much water: some of the worst flooding in the country. We’re not that far from the overheated north Atlantic, and so wave after wave of unrelenting rain has descended on the state, drowning, among other things, the main street of our capital city (previously best known for being the only state capital without a McDonald’s). Another round of thunderstorms struck over the weekend; my county got six inches of rain, triggering landslides and closing the roads in and out of town.

It turns out that steep mountain slopes and narrow mountain valleys combine with an overheated atmosphere (remember the 21st century’s most important physical fact: Warm air holds more water vapor; July set a new record for US thunderstorms) to produce crazy flooding. I was away during this round of meteorological depravity, and it was hard to be seeing pictures of roads I travel every day wiped out.

There is no safe place.

And yet I remain glad I live where I do, not because it’s protected from climate change, but because it’s at least a little bit more equipped to deal with it. And that, in turn, is because it has high levels of social trust. Only 38 per cent of Americans say they mostly or completely trust their neighbors, but a 2018 Vermont survey found that 78 per cent of residents think that “people in my neighborhood trust each other to be good neighbors”; 69 per cent of Vermonters said that they knew most of their neighbors, compared with 26 per cent of Americans in general.

Those levels of social trust help explain, I think, why the state had the lowest level of fatalities from Covid-19, much lower than its neighboring states and much lower than other small rural states with similarly homogeneous populations. Everyone wore masks, everyone got vaccinated. In the same way, when this summer’s floods hit, people came together, reenacting the surge of mutual aid that came after Hurricane Irene similarly drenched the state in 2011.

This is not an argument to move to Vermont. Among other things, the state had the lowest housing vacancy rate in the country before this summer’s flooding wiped out more of the state’s affordable housing stock. And Vermont has its share of problems, some of them rooted in an aging population resistant to progress of any kind – there are times when I think its de facto motto is ‘Change Anything You Want Once I’m Dead’, which explains among other things the de facto moratorium on building the wind turbines that could help provide us cleaner power.

Excerpted: ‘Instead of Moving to Escape Climate Chaos, Build Social Trust Where You Are’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org