

Will Climate Get Some Respect Now?

NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF , New York Times, October 31, 2012

President Obama and Mitt Romney seemed determined not to discuss climate change in this campaign. So thanks to Hurricane Sandy for forcing the issue: Isn't it time to talk not only about weather, but also about climate?

It's true, of course, that no single storm or drought can be attributed to climate change. Atlantic hurricanes in the Northeast go way back, as the catastrophic "snow hurricane" of 1804 attests. But many scientists believe that rising carbon emissions could make extreme weather — like Sandy — more likely.

"You can't say any one single event is reflective of climate change," William Solecki, the co-chairman of the New York City Panel on Climate Change, told me. "But it's illustrative of the conditions and events and scenarios that we expect with climate change."

In that sense, whatever its causes, Sandy offers a window into the way ahead.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York says he told President Obama the other day that it seems "we have a 100-year flood every two years now." Indeed, The Times has reported that three of the 10 biggest floods in Lower Manhattan since 1900 have occurred in the last three years.

So brace yourself, for several reasons:

- Hurricanes form when the ocean is warm, and that warmth is their fuel. The Atlantic waters off the East Coast set a record high temperature this summer. Presumably most of that is natural variation, and some is human-induced climate change.
- Computer models suggest that hurricanes won't necessarily become more frequent, but they may become stronger. As the United States Global Change Research Program, a collaboration of federal agencies, puts it, "The intensity of these storms is likely to increase in this century."
- Climate change adds moisture to the atmosphere, which may mean that storms come with more rain and more flooding.
- Sandy was particularly destructive because it was prevented from moving back out to sea by a "blocking pattern" associated with the jet stream. There's debate about this, but one recent study suggested that melting sea ice in the Arctic may lead to such blocking.
- Rising seas create a higher baseline for future storm surges. The New York City Panel on Climate Change has projected that coastal waters may rise by two feet by 2050 and four feet by the end of the century.

I was schooled in the far-reaching changes under way several years ago by Eskimos in Alaska, who told me of their amazement at seeing changes in their Arctic village — from melting permafrost to robins (for which their Inupiat language has no word), and even a (shivering) porcupine. If we can't see that something extraordinary is going on in the world around us, we're in trouble.

"Of the 10 warmest summers on record for the contiguous United States, seven have occurred since 2000," notes Jake Crouch of the National Climatic Data Center.

They include this summer's drought in the United States, the worst in more than half a century.

"For the extreme hot weather of the recent past, there is virtually no explanation other than climate change," James E. Hansen, a NASA climate scientist, recently wrote in The Washington Post.

Politicians have dropped the ball, but so have those of us in the news business. The number of articles about climate change fell by 41 percent from 2009 to 2011, according to DailyClimate.org.

There are no easy solutions, but we may need to invest in cleaner energy, impose a carbon tax or other curbs on greenhouse gases, and, above all, rethink how we can reduce the toll of a changing climate. For example, we may not want to rebuild in some coastal areas that have been hammered by Sandy.

We'll also need a stronger FEMA — which makes Romney's past suggestions that FEMA be privatized particularly myopic.

(That's almost as bizarre as Michael Brown, the FEMA director during Hurricane Katrina, scolding Obama for responding to Sandy "so quickly.")

Democrats have been AWOL on climate change, but Republicans have been even more recalcitrant. Their failure is odd, because in other areas of national security Republicans pride themselves on their vigilance. Romney doesn't want to wait until he sees an Iranian nuclear weapon before acting, so why the passivity about climate change?

Along with eight million others, the Kristofs have lost power, so I've been sending Twitter messages on my iPhone by candlelight — an odd juxtaposition that feels like a wake-up call. In the candlelit aftermath of a future hurricane, I'm guessing, we'll look back at the silence about climate in the 2012 election and ask: "What were they thinking?"