

The Sunny Side of Climate

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Much of what we have been hearing in recent years about the climate impacts or about the climate system has come in the form of what could easily be called “bad news”. That bad news is collectively what I consider to be the “dark side” of climate.

The dark side refers to climate-related news in the media about the negative aspects of climate’s impacts on society and the environment. Such news is not hard to find on TV, in the newspapers or on the Internet at any given point in time: Droughts in Africa, North and South America, East, South and Southeast Asia; floods in the same places; forest fires Southeast Asia or in the United States; hurricanes, cyclones or typhoons, monsoon failure; mudslides, and so forth. We shouldn’t leave out El Nino episodes. In April 2004 the Korean Meteorological Agency convened and international knowledge-sharing conference on “high impact climate and weather”. High impact events include but are not limited to severe weather and climate anomalies. They capture media headlines briefly, because they are usually associated with highly visible death and destruction.

More recently, people worldwide have been bombarded with science stories about global warming of the Earth’s atmosphere, which is more bad news. Global warming stories tell us that the climates we are used to are changing quickly and in ways societies have not seen in hundreds or thousands of years. The global climate has already heated up by more than a half degree Celsius since 1900. Researchers are trying to understand as well as to predict future global temperatures and extremes.

All the above is true. People everywhere know that weather and climate extremes can be hard on human activities as well as on the natural environment. However, the “dark side” of climate must be put into what I would call a more realistic context which is the fact that, regardless of perceptions, most of the time the climate in a given region is favorable for the human activities that are being undertaken and are in harmony with the location’s average weather and climate conditions.

A look at the history of climate-society-environment interactions of past centuries underscores the fact that **for the most part** different local and regional climates have been favorable, enabling societies to survive their ups and downs and even extreme outlying events.



www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/default.html

Agricultural practices have produced surpluses of food and fiber for local to national domestic consumption as well as for export. This has been possible in large measure because of relatively favorable climate conditions.

www.tropicalisland.de/bali_kuta.html

Rice Harvest in Bali



Some places around the globe have been very successful and using their existing climate regimes for surplus production. For example, North America's Great Plains (in the USA and Canada) is considered one of the world's most important "breadbaskets". There are other breadbaskets in, say, Canada, Argentina, Australia. Some locations in developing countries

have been called potential breadbaskets, given their favorable water and temperature conditions, e.g., the Gezira region in the Sudan or the Awash River basin in Ethiopia. Where the soils are fertile and where water is available, food can be grown. Where humans have learned to use or manipulate or bypass the constraints imposed by their climate regimes, the "sunny side of climate" prevails.



Planting cotton in the Awash Valley.

Courtesy United Nations

People need to realize that the climate conditions in the areas where they live are generally favorable for food production. In some locations, the influences of colonialization and later of globalization have influenced human desires away from traditional crops grown locally to favor introduced crops such as wheat (instead of sorghum or millet). Unfortunately normal, favorable, weather and climate conditions are not newsworthy, unless, when it comes to food production, a surplus crop lowers prices that the farmers receive for their hard work. On the other hand, climate anomalies and climate-related disasters

generate media interest and frenzy... a drought, a famine, a flood, a fire a killing frost.

There is an urgency to generate news about a favorable climate's influences on agriculture, water resources, energy and public health and public safety. It is to the benefit of all and especially society to realize the benefits that their existing climate regimes provide.

Making the general public and policy makers aware of what most people in rural areas already know --- that climate is, more often than not, favorable for a wide range of human activities --- can help to generate a healthier understanding of and respect for the global climate regime that we have benefited from in the 20th century. Climate stories need not be only "doom and gloom" stories. There are many positive aspects of climate. We need to be thankful for them. At the same time though we have to keep an eye on the dark side

of climate and about how the climates we have become used to are changing at rates that are beyond contemporary societies' experience.

Which of these Sudan photographs is likely to make it into the media?



Rice Research Program Season 2001-2002
Gezira Research Station - Wad Medani (Sudan)



Women and children from a drought affected village in Sudan (USAID)

Which of these Papua New Guinea photographs is likely to make it into the media?



Smallholder house and oil palm harvest, Papua New Guinea
www.communityeconomies.org/info.html



Famine in Papua New Guinea

This editorial highlights my belief that societies need to take full advantage of their existing climates --- their extremes, anomalies as well as average conditions. While the dark side of climate seems to gather the major share of the news, there are climates even harsh climates, which societies have learned to survive if not thrive. That to me is what I call "the sunny side" of climate. However, I also believe that the global atmosphere is heating up and that human activities (such as the burning of fossil fuels --- coal, oil, and gas --- and deforesting tropical rainforests) have been contributing to global warming.

The science of climate change is uncertain, as is the science of today's climate, but uncertainty should not stop us from taking precautionary actions that make sense to do anyway, such as using energy more efficiently or developing environment-friendly energy sources or stopping the wanton destruction of tropical rainforests. Meanwhile, we need to fully exploit the climate systems we currently have in order to be better prepared for exploiting the climate systems of the future, however different they may become.