It’s not too late for Australia to forestall a dystopian future that alternates between Mad Max and Waterworld

Michael Mann

A year ago I lived through the Black Summer. I had arrived in Sydney in mid-December 2019.
A

had arrived in Sydney in mid-December 2019 to collaborate with Australian researchers studying the impacts of climate change on extreme weather events. Instead of studying those events, however, I ended up experiencing them.

Even in the confines of my apartment in Coogee, looking out over the Pacific, I could smell the smoke from the massive bushfires blazing across New South Wales. As I flew to Canberra to participate in a special “bushfires” episode of the ABC show Q+A, I witnessed mountains ablaze with fire. One man I met during my stay lost most of his 180-year-old family farm in the fires that ravaged south-east New South Wales near Milton.

My experiences indelibly coloured the book I was writing on the climate crisis at the time called The New Climate War.

I returned home to the US last March, my sabbatical stay cut short by coronavirus. But just a year later, with memories of the hellish inferno that was the Black Summer still fresh in my mind, I must painfully watch from afar now as my Aussie mates endure further climate-wrought devastation. This time it’s not fires. It’s floods.

I lectured earlier this week at the Pennsylvania State University, where I’m teaching a course on climate change communication. I started class, as I always do, with a glance at the latest climate-themed stories appearing in my news feed. We watched a video – in stunned disbelief – of a house floating down a river. Let me repeat that. There was a house floating down a river.

Australians are of course familiar with the scene of which I speak. It’s the dwelling that was observed floating down the Manning River in NSW, a few hundred kilometres north of Sydney, as the state suffered massive floods. Emergency responders rescued hundreds of stranded people after record rainfall caused the rivers to swell.

In fact, more than 18,000 people had to be evacuated in Sydney and the mid-north coast, thanks to what amounted to a “100-year flood”. For the unwashed, that’s a deluge so Noachian in character that it shouldn’t, on average, happen more often than once in a hundred years.

But those sorts of statistics are misleading. The statistician in me notes that they make the very tenuous assumption of a “stationary” climate, that is to say, a climate that isn’t changing. But the climate is changing.
Climate that isn’t changing, but the climate is changing, thanks to human carbon pollution, making episodes that might have once been “100-year events” now more like “10-year events”.

Tragically, many of the same towns that were devastated by the massive bushfires a little more than a year ago found themselves under siege from these historic floods. A climate contrarian would cry foul: “You climate scientists can’t make up your mind. Is climate change making it wetter or drier?” But in fact, that’s a false choice: It’s both.

We know that a warmer atmosphere holds more moisture, so during the wet season when you get rainfall, you get more of it, in larger downpours and bursts. But hotter temperatures also mean drier soils and worsened droughts in the dry season, conditions conducive to bigger, hotter-burning, faster-spreading bushfires.

In a scientific study I co-authored a year ago, we demonstrated that climate change is causing the wet season to get wetter and the dry season to get drier in many parts of the world. NSW is one of those regions, and we’ve seen the consequence in the whiplash of fires and floods that have plagued the region over the past 14 months.

Australians can’t seem to catch a break. But it’s not too late to forestall a dystopian future that alternates between Mad Max and Waterworld.

Adapting to the harsh new reality Australia now faces will be hard, but it will be possible with sufficient government funding and infrastructure to support climate resilience. If, however, we allow the planet to continue to heat up, many heavily occupied parts of Australia will simply become uninhabitable.

There is still a narrow window of opportunity left. If we can lower carbon emissions by a factor of two over the next decade, we can still prevent a catastrophic 1.5°C warming of the planet. If that is to happen, Australia, one of the largest exporters of fossil fuels on the planet, will need to do its part.

Thus far conservative prime minister Scott Morrison and the Coalition government have shown little appetite for making good on these obligations, however. They have instead engaged in the sort of soft denial I describe in The New Climate War that has come to replace the no-longer credible outright denial of the reality of the climate crisis.
Morrison and his allies use soothing but hollow words like “resilience”, “adaptation” and “innovation” to make it sound like they’re actually doing something when they’re not. And they suggest they’re moving towards net zero carbon emissions by mid-century, while meanwhile promoting a “gas-led” economic recovery and shunning policies, such as carbon pricing and subsidies for clean energy, that could actually help decarbonise the economy.

Morrison’s record on climate is so atrocious, in fact, that the UK’s own conservative prime minister, Boris Johnson, disinvited him from last year’s global climate summit.

If Morrison and the Coalition government refuse to act now, then perhaps the Australian people need to disinvite him from serving another term.

The future is still in your hands, mates!

Michael E Mann is distinguished professor of atmospheric science at Pennsylvania State University. He is author of *The New Climate War: The Fight to Take Back Our Planet*

... we have a small favour to ask. Through these turbulent and challenging times, millions rely on the Guardian for independent journalism that stands for truth and integrity. Readers chose to support us financially more than 1.5 million times in 2020, joining existing supporters in 180 countries.

For 2021, we commit to another year of high-impact reporting that can counter misinformation and offer an authoritative, trustworthy source of news for everyone. With no shareholders or billionaire owner, we set our own agenda and provide truth-seeking journalism that’s free from commercial and political influence. When it’s never mattered more, we can investigate and challenge without fear or favour.

Unlike many others, we have maintained our choice: to keep Guardian journalism open for all readers, regardless of where they live or what they can afford to pay. We do this because we believe in information equality, where everyone deserves to read accurate news and thoughtful analysis. Greater numbers of people are staying well-informed on world events, and being inspired to take meaningful action.

In the last year alone, we offered readers a
comprehensive, international perspective on critical events - from the Black Lives Matter protests, to the US presidential election, Brexit, and the ongoing pandemic. We enhanced our reputation for urgent, powerful reporting on the climate emergency, and made the decision to reject advertising from fossil fuel companies, divest from the oil and gas industries, and set a course to achieve net zero emissions by 2030.

If there were ever a time to join us, it is now. You can power Guardian journalism and help sustain our future. **Support the Guardian from as little as $1 - it only takes a minute. If you can, please consider supporting us with a regular amount each month. Thank you.**

... we have a small favour to ask. Through these turbulent and challenging times, millions rely on the Guardian for independent journalism that stands for truth and integrity. Readers chose to support us financially more than 1.5 million times in 2020, joining existing supporters in 180 countries.

For 2021, we commit to another year of high-impact reporting that can counter misinformation and offer an authoritative, trustworthy source of news for everyone. With no shareholders or billionaire owner, we set our own agenda and provide truth-seeking journalism that’s free from commercial and political influence. When it’s never mattered more, we can investigate and challenge without fear or favour.

Unlike many others, we have maintained our choice: to keep Guardian journalism open for all readers, regardless of where they live or what they can afford to pay. We do this because we believe in information equality, where everyone deserves to read accurate news and thoughtful analysis. Greater numbers of people are staying well-informed on world events, and being inspired to take meaningful action.

In the last year alone, we offered readers a comprehensive, international perspective on critical events - from the Black Lives Matter protests, to the US presidential election, Brexit, and the ongoing pandemic. We enhanced our reputation for urgent, powerful reporting on the climate emergency, and made the decision to reject advertising from fossil fuel companies, divest from the oil and gas industries, and...
It's not too late for Australia to forestall a dystopian future that alternates between Mad Max and Waterworld | Climate change | The Guardian

companies, divest from the oil and gas industries, and set a course to achieve net zero emissions by 2030. If there were ever a time to join us, it is now. You can power Guardian journalism and help sustain our future. Support the Guardian from as little as $1 – it only takes a minute. If you can, please consider supporting us with a regular amount each month. Thank you.

Support the Guardian →

Remind me in May

opinion

Steve Bell on the ‘irresponsible diversion’ of a Covid inquiry - cartoon

The Guardian view on Patel’s asylum proposals: incoherent, unworkable and inhumane

The Guardian view on Scottish politics: a battle with no winners

Liverpool is a remarkable city. Its people deserve better than shoddy governance

It’s not ‘greed’ behind the Covid vaccine success. It’s state finance and the NHS

Australia’s economy is more reliant on iron ore than ever

For years Liberal leaders have wheeled out female MPs like me to defend disgusting behaviour. Enough!

Priti Patel’s two-tier asylum plan treats refugees with cold indifference

Owen Jones

Greg Jericho

Catherine Cusack

Enver Solomon

Jonathan Tonge

Support the Guardian

Remind me in May
It's not too late for Australia to forestall a dystopian future that alternates between Mad Max and Waterworld | Climate change | The Guardian

Guardian Pick
Thanks heaps mate! Our government is the representatives of fossil fuel producers and our Prime Minister is nothing more than an apologist for them.

We are suffering but our Federal Government says they will not address climate change if it effects our economy! That's the bullshit argument that we have to tolerate because the main source of our "news services" spew out of the mouth of Murdoch.

Don't worry, I (we.?) are happy to ...

Jump to comment

Guardian Pick
Yes, our country has been wracked by drought, fire and floods. And I feel sorry for those people who have been affected. But how many of you voted for the Coalition or for the ALP?

The need to address the issues of climate change has been understood for decades, but most Australians continue to vote for parties which pay lip service to the most significant issue of the next several centuries. If we had voted in govts which took envir...

Jump to comment

moneytherootofevil
24 Mar 2021 8:35

Jump to comment

wordinedgeways
24 Mar 2021 8:44

76

Jump to comment

View more comments