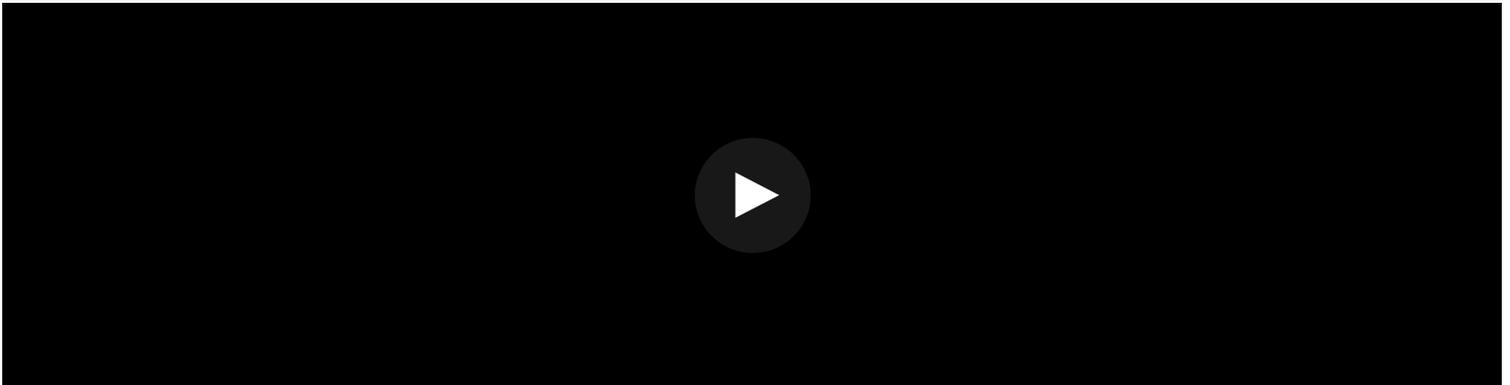


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Opinion
Climate change

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

Michael Mann



Wed 24 Mar 2021 10:54 AEDT



▲ NSW flooding: house swept away in flood waters in West Taree – video



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.

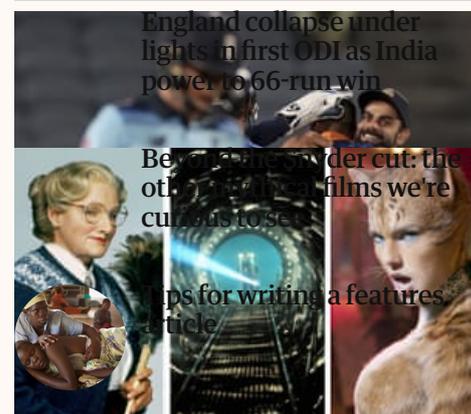
In fact, more than 18,000 people **had to be evacuated** in Sydney and the mid-north coast, thanks to what amounted to a “100-year flood”. For the unwashed, that's a deluge so Noachian in character that it shouldn't, on average, happen more often than once in a hundred years.

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

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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 1.5C 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

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**

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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 arguement 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 ...

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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 enviro...

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