

Just the Facts – but the Selected Facts



A forest fire is raging in California's Big Sur region. Forest fires in this time of year (normally the rainy season) are unheard of, but California has experienced several years of drought, making it vulnerable to such fires. This is a result of global climate disruption/global warming. Yesterday, the main newspaper in the Bay Area – the San Francisco Chronicle – published a leading article on the Big Sur fire. I had the following exchange with one of the reporters who wrote the article:

Me

I read your article on the forest fire in Big Sur. This was just after I read this scary [article](#) by the excellent journalist Dahr Jamail on global climate change.

As is typical of almost all articles on drought, forest fires, unusual storms, your article has not a mention of the obvious fact that this forest fire in Big Sur is the result of the global climate change. Maybe you mentioned it and your editor removed it. Or maybe, knowing it wasn't wanted, you didn't bother to mention it because doing so would be harmful to your careers. Whatever.

But how can you continue to just go along with a press that continues to ignore the connection between climate disruption and these events? Don't you care about the future, including that of the next generation? To return to Dahr Jamail: Yes, he's a good researcher and writer, but more important, he has genuine integrity and courage. Too bad more reporters don't have these qualities.

Shame.

Reporter

Thanks for the note, John, but I would suggest you read the Chronicle more often. We have covered climate change - including ocean acidification, greenhouse gases, arctic melting, sea level rise, species migration and the role of fire in the ecosystem - more thoroughly than any newspaper in the United States. Look in our archives on sfgate and you will see.

That is a fine story by Dahr Jamail, but it is a first person editorial expressing his own perspective. I'm sure you know the difference between that and a news story about a fire.

As you must know, it is impossible to attribute any single event to global warming. The phenomenon is measured over time, but I think smart readers are capable of drawing their own conclusions from the facts, as you have. December wildfires are rare in Northern California. Is it climate change? That's for scientists to determine.

Me

Thank you for your reply. However, I think you are mistaken on several points:

An editorial advocates a certain policy or something like that. Dahr Jamail's article is one part description of his own personal experiences and one part a report on what some climatologists are thinking. What these scientists are thinking is extremely serious - serious enough that all the major media should be shouting it from the rooftops if there is even a possibility that they are correct.

As for the report on this particular forest fire: you are mistaken. There is not the slightest doubt that it can be attributed to global climate change, one aspect of which is a lengthening of forest fire seasons. Even if that were not clearly the case, the fact remains that almost all reports on unusual weather events, severe forest forest, etc. completely leave out any mention of global climate change; they never put the report in that context.

As for whether a particular event can be attributed directly to global climate change: You are correct but only in the narrowest sense. The media can always hide behind this excuse - that we can't tell whether this particular extreme weather event (as opposed to an out-of-season forest fire) is due to climate change, but that begs the question. It's a little like saying about a chain smoker who dies of lung cancer that we don't know if his or her smoking caused the cancer. It obscures the larger issue: That global climate change is not something that we may (or may not, according to some) see in 30 years; it is something that we are seeing here and now. By obscuring that context you help obscure the extreme seriousness of the present situation.

I conclude with an incident cited in Ross Gelbspan's "Boiling Point": *"A few years ago, a top editor at a major TV network was asked why, given the increasing proportion of news budgets dedicated to weather disasters, the network news broadcasts did not make this connection (with global climate change). 'We did that. Once. But it triggered a barrage of complaints from the Global Climate Change Coalition (an oil-industry sponsored climate change denial group) to our top executives at the network.... The editor agreed that it would be very useful to the public in covering severe floods, droughts, and storms to note that 'scientists associated this pattern of violent weather with global warming.' But in the end, he confided, the industry basically intimidated the network into dropping this connection from its coverage. The threat was implicit: If the network persisted, it ran the risk of losing a lot of lucrative oil and auto advertising dollars."*

John Reimann

P.S. As far as familiarity with the Chronicle: I have been a subscriber for many, many years. I am very familiar with what it does and doesn't cover.

Reporter

I guarantee you that would never happen at the Chronicle. Television sold out years ago. I would not be working here anymore if the bosses were intimidated by the oil industry or if anybody told me not to print something because some interest group didn't want us to. Climate change is mentioned in many of our stories and the danger has been detailed many times. The story by Jamail includes the opinions of selected climatologists in support of his conclusion that global warming has already reached a catastrophic crossroads. May very well be true, but it is still his point of view. A news story presents the facts and expert opinions and lets you draw your own conclusions.

Anyway, here is another comment about the same story. His facts are all wrong, but he seems to think this same story shouts pretty loud from the rooftops about global warming. Perhaps you two should talk:

Your article is again trying to infer that somehow this fire is due to "continuing dry conditions" in the Big Sur and that is a lie. The fire was due to some careless camper or an environmentalists that wants to chalk it up to global warming. Also the truth is that rarely is their 8" of rain from July through December of any year. You mentioned that this "dry weather" is also in ALL of California. That is also a lie. I took the records of your pal Null's and his records for San Francisco rainfall shows no average of 8 inches for this period. I assume the Big Sur and the coast would receive the same amount of rain. Since the rain comes from Alaska, the rainfall in the Big Sur may be less. We do get occasional rain from the south called the Pineapple Express but they are rare. So I did take a few rain data from Null's "records" and determined the following. For the last decade there has been only one year where the rainfall was over 8 inches. That year was 2010 when SF had 11.65 inches of rain. The year 2012 and there was 13.1 inches of rain. So we haven't had a "lot" of droughts in the Bay Area and would belie this global warming nonsense. But whose records did you believe this time? The article was a pathetic attempt to link global warming to this fire. That is a lie also even though you did it in a cryptic fashion. Will you ever grow up.

Me

Those who deny the fact of human-caused global climate disruption should be given as much attention when reporting the news as the flat-earthers should be considered when trying to navigate a boat or airplane.

John Reimann