

The price we pay for ignoring climate change

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In January, I reflect by the fire on the year that has passed. It is important to slow down enough to grasp what is happening to our world. The Earth has many timescales. Some are long and slow moving, and they take decades to unfold — like the melting of the Arctic ice cap as greenhouse gases warm the planet.

As the seasons change, we can adapt and try to fit in with what the Earth is telling us. But when powerful storms blow up or wild fires explode, all we can do is try to get out of the way. Sometimes it is too late, because we have ignored warnings and have put buildings in vulnerable places.

But it is hard to look back on 2012 without a sense of foreboding. Winter and spring temperatures were exceptionally warm, and precipitation and snow cover were very low across much of the United States. This led to major wildfires in New Mexico in May and Colorado in June. Extreme drought and record temperatures affected crops and food supplies in many areas. Later in the year, the waters of Lake Michigan and Huron were nearing record low levels, and the low water levels of the Mississippi River were severely impacting commercial traffic.

Then at the end of October, Hurricane Sandy turned toward the coast and merged with a mid-latitude storm. Powerful winds and a record storm surge devastated coastal New Jersey and New York City, flooding the subway tunnels of southern Manhattan. Reports had been predicting this disaster for 30 years, but protective measures were considered too costly.

As the momentum of climate change increases, we are sliding into the unknown. Twenty years ago, participants at the United Nations Climate Change Convention agreed to stop dangerous climate change, but every year the nations meet and fail to reach agreement on how to do this. Goals are set up for the future, such as keeping the global mean temperature rise below 3.8 F (2°C), but as we continue to burn more and more fossil fuels, these goals soon seem impossible to achieve.

Now gloomy articles are saying that a 7.6 F (4°C) warmer world is inevitable on our current energy path — with much higher temperatures over land and at high latitudes. We should not be surprised. Ten, 20 years ago scientists pointed out clearly that urgent action was needed. But societies find it much easier to set worthy, distant goals than to agree on binding actions now.

Again the excuse is that slowing the pace of climate change costs too much. The more honest answer is that wealthy fossil fuel industries control us and our political systems. The truth is that the cost of ignoring climate change is estimated to be 60 times higher than the cost of building an energy-efficient world much less dependent of fossil fuel. And the damage we are inflicting on the earth's ecosystem is far beyond measure.

It is time to stop complaining about all the deferred costs arising from using the atmosphere as a free waste dump. The bills are now coming due. We need an annually increasing charge on all fossil fuels used in the state to fund energy retrofits to our older buildings, to pay for more efficient transit systems, and to cover all the increasing costs of adapting to climate change. We need to fund the costs of rebuilding a more resilient infrastructure after storms like Irene. Higher costs for fossil fuels will nudge us towards greater efficiency and wiser choices.

It is morally unacceptable to sacrifice the Earth and our children simply because we are unwilling to face change. Instead, every day when the sun rises over the mountain we can look with joy at the world we love — and together choose a new path into the future.

Toward a global environmental ethic: *The Blue River Declaration*: <http://bit.ly/TZF1h1>