

<http://rutlandherald.com/article/20150315/OPINION06/703159979>

Working with the Earth

Alan Betts (<http://alanbetts.com/writings>)

This winter the eastern United States and Canada have had below-normal temperatures and above-normal snow cover. These go together: snow reflects sunlight and can lock in cold temperatures. In the fall the warmer Great Lakes produced many lake-effect storms, and in the past 2 months, there have been many powerful coastal snowstorms developing over the warmer Gulf-Stream. As the oceans warm, evaporation increases, storms get stronger and dump more snow.

It has been chilly here, but almost everywhere else in the northern hemisphere, from the western US to Eurasia, there were record high temperatures in January. California saw the warmest three-months on record for November to January. I heard the grizzly bears in Yellowstone were coming out of hibernation early!

On a global scale the Earth set a new global temperature record in 2014, and this continued into January. But it is stationary weather patterns that again are giving us these extremes. After two cold snowy winters in New England, we have probably forgotten the winter of 2011-2012 when we were locked into the opposite warm pattern with very little snow.

We have wasted the past 20 years. Instead of drafting binding international agreements to reduce carbon pollution, we constructed a binding but amoral global market, based on minimizing costs and maximizing profit. It was designed to make cheaper goods for us, but it has dumped staggering pollution into the atmosphere in Asia, where the primary energy source was burning coal.

We know technically what to do to slow the march of climate change: use energy more efficiently and shift to renewable sources. The latest dimmable LED lights still give me a thrill with their clear light and low energy use. Thanks to Efficiency Vermont they are cheap in the hardware store. Technically we know what to do, but ethically and morally we are lost souls.

The latest research confirms that to have a fair chance of keeping the average global warming below about 4 degrees Fahrenheit this century, we will have to leave a third of the oil, half the gas and more than 80 percent of the coal reserves in the ground. So it's clearly time to stop developing new fossil fuel reserves. This is disturbing news to an economic system that sees fossil fuels as simply wealth to be exploited now, deferring the staggering climate costs into the future. This is why we need a pollution tax on burning fossil carbon.

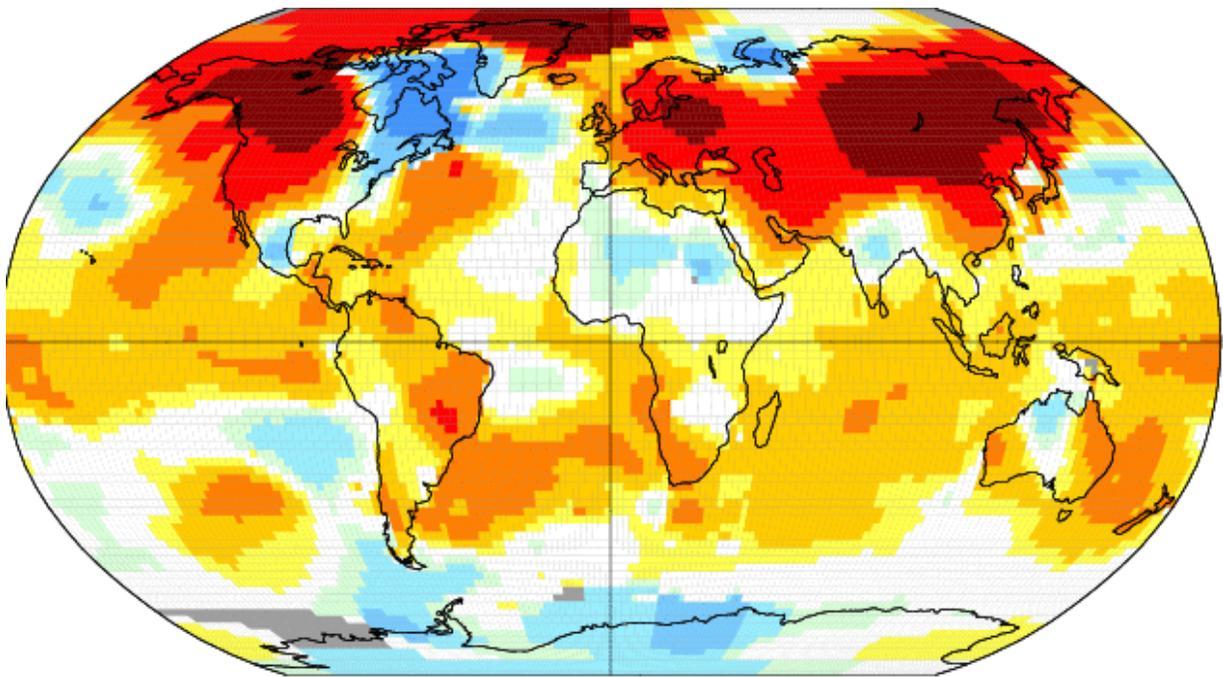
Earlier this year, Pope Francis quoted an old farmer as saying: "God always forgives, humans rarely forgive, but nature never forgives". At first I thought this was a little harsh, so I checked the source.

The farmer was referring to the exploitation of the land by monoculture until the soil has lost its vitality. Fair enough: if we don't stop burning fossil carbon, than nature, as well as human conflict, will crush our economic system with overwhelming costs. The Earth simply responds to our thoughtless exploitation with melting polar ice, rising seas, intensifying storms and extreme weather.

But what happens when we change direction and start to work with the Earth; as when a farmer diversifies into organic agriculture and the soil is rejuvenated. The Earth heals, and we are healed also; so in this sense we may be forgiven. But to change direction we must repent of our old ways.

This is the great moral challenge we face this century: understanding and reconnecting to the Earth. We tried to suppress the wisdom of the indigenous peoples who had a spiritual connection to the land. Little did we realize that a century later, this wisdom would be central to our survival as a species, and a profound source of hope.

January 2015 Temperature Anomaly (deg F) from 1951-1980 (NASA)



-7 -3.5 -1.8 -.9 -.4 .4 .9 1.8 3.5 7 15 deg F