

Biblical floods and storms

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As individuals we are all very concerned about our children's future. In contrast, our society ignores the misery that climate change will bring to the future of all children, as well as much of the life on Earth. This odd disconnect, which so many can rationalize away, reflects a clash of values that we avoid discussing. Society runs on an economic system where money and profit rule, and the future is discounted. With this strange logic, the future rapidly becomes devalued and worthless compared to our greed for present wealth. Life on Earth in the future, including our children's lives, are treated as worthless.

We love our children and are proud of our individual freedom, but we have been fooled to tolerate an immoral economic system, where the rich and powerful can exploit the Earth, the poor, and our children. Yet still we chant its mantra of endless material growth.

The truth is just the reverse. *Climate change exposes our current economic system, based on exploitation and profit, as both valueless and almost useless for dealing with the future.* This is hard for us to grasp. Yet we must because the Earth does not discount the future. It just stores the energy from the sun that cannot escape to space as we burn more fossil fuel, and add greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. It takes time for the oceans to warm and the ice-sheets to melt, but they are warming and melting, and sea-level will rise for centuries. Inexorably climate change will accelerate on our present path. The warmer ocean drives stronger storms.

The flood of biblical proportions that Hurricane Harvey brought to Houston is a bitter reminder in the present. Some will claim it is just another five hundred year flood (the third in three years). Politicians still pretend that climate change and the warming of the oceans is a myth. But the Earth cannot forget, and fittingly this flood struck the coastal oil industry of Texas. But tragically the poor suffered the most. Perhaps a few brave biblical scholars will look back at Genesis and realize that we have not kept the covenant between Heaven and Earth that was the promise of protection against another great flood.

We can retreat from the coasts, and the damage to our fossil fuel industries benefits the Earth for a brief moment; although the conscious choice of an escalating carbon tax would be much better. However the damage to our forests and food supply, and the increase in extreme weather, floods and droughts from a changing climate will bring much hardship. This will expose the brutal cruelty of our present administration, whose primary goal seems to be to protect the value of fossil fuel assets, regardless of the hundreds of millions of people and species that will die later this century.

Hurricanes again came sharply in focus for me last week as hurricane Irma strengthened to a category 5 storm over the warmer ocean. It became the strongest storm ever recorded in the Atlantic. It was approaching St Thomas where my daughter and grandchildren live. With maximum winds nearing 180 mph, I helped them move to a safer location, where they huddled terrified. I spent hours glued to the Puerto Rico radar, watching as the eyewall grazed the northern shore, doing immense damage. After five days, they were evacuated safely to Puerto Rico by a catamaran bringing in emergency supplies, and crewed by my elder daughter's friends.

Climate science has been subject to extraordinary scrutiny, because so much is at stake. Dealing with climate change requires fundamental changes in our political, economic and financial system, and society doesn't want to face this. Protecting wealth and profits now is more important than the future of our children and of life of Earth. Denial is the only way that those in power can try to hide from the savagery of this strategy.

For 50 years I have studied weather and climate science. Long ago in what we call the Carboniferous period, lush vegetation in a tropical hot-house climate removed CO₂ from the atmosphere for millions of years, and laid it down in the oceans to produce the fossil fuels. As CO₂ in the air fell, the earth cooled and eventually the icecaps formed. If we burn all these fossil fuels this century, we will push the Earth once again back to a hothouse climate with disastrous consequences. Right now we are wasting our time and our resources. It is time we changed course, and made the rapid shift to an energy efficient society, powered by renewable energy.

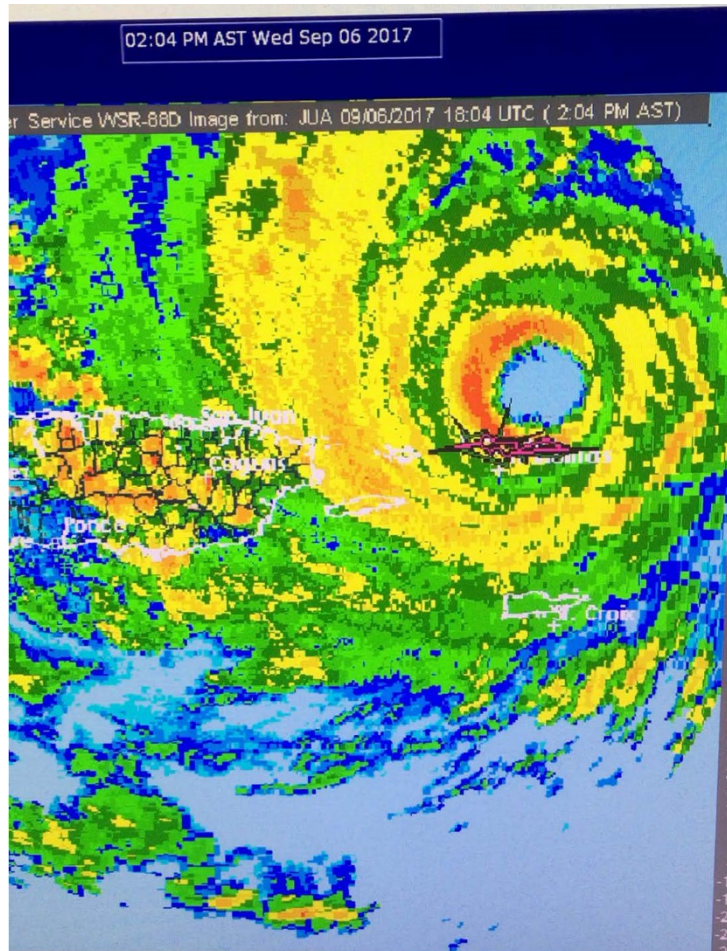


Figure 1 The eye of Hurricane Irma as it grazes the northern shore of St Thomas on September 6 as a strong category 5 storm. Red lines are warning boxes. Puerto Rico is to the left and St Croix to the south.