

Apocalypse Soon: 9 Terrifying Signs of Environmental Doom and Gloom

Rising sea levels, earthquake threats and more reasons the world as we know it might be ending

By [John Knefel](#) August 18, 2015



John Lund/Getty

Between natural disasters and climate change, the environment can be a pretty terrifying thing to think about. Don't think so? Here are 9 indications of looming disaster to keep you awake at night:

1. The Pacific Northwest, and the Disaster That Will Destroy It

[A recent story in *The New Yorker*](#) depicted in horrifying detail how an earthquake, followed by a tsunami, will – at some point to come – hit Seattle, Portland and the rest of the Pacific Northwest. The effects will be, in a word, catastrophic. FEMA estimates at least 27,000 people will be injured and 13,000 will die, and that's an optimistic outlook. The article says that the region is almost entirely unprepared for this disaster, as many of the buildings in the major cities were built before anyone even knew they were sitting on the continent's largest fault line.

Need more reasons to freak out? The earthquake's cycle is roughly 243 years. We're now 315 years into that cycle. That's not to say we're due, exactly, or that the quake can be predicted with precision. But it might be time to start preparing before America's chilliest area gets destroyed.

2. The Continuing Psychological Fallout From Fukushima

Speaking of earthquakes and the tsunamis that follow them, the disaster at Japan's Fukushima nuclear power plant in 2011 continues to wreak havoc on survivors –

though not necessarily in the way you might think. A new study published in the science journal *The Lancet* found that "evacuees were found to be [almost five times more likely than average to have suffered psychological distress](#)." The same study found that while survivors' exposure to radiation does not suggest many will face increased rates of cancer, many of those survivors *do* suffer from post-traumatic stress, depression and feelings of stigmatization. The study found similar psychic tolls on those who survived the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown.



Fire boat response crews battle the blazing remnants of the off shore oil rig Deepwater Horizon in the Gulf of Mexico near New Orleans, Louisiana on April 21st, 2010. U.S. Coast Guard/Getty

3. Deepwater Horizon: Still Oozing

It's been more than five years since the largest maritime oil spill ever, and the oil continues to ooze in the wetlands just south of New Orleans. "One day, a patch of the wetland is green and lush, the next it's drenched in thick, noxious goo," [ScienceNews reported in April](#). "It's a haunting vestige of North America's largest marine oil disaster."

The Deepwater Horizon oil rig was owned and operated by BP, who recently settled all federal and state lawsuits resulting from the spill [for \\$18.7 billion](#). The settlement, and relatively low oil prices, have hit BP's bottom line

hard this year, as the company posted a \$5.8 billion loss in the second quarter. The explosion, and the 87 days of oil spewing into the Gulf of Mexico that followed, have cost BP nearly \$54 billion in total. But the environmental costs [will be with us for generations](#).

4. Great Pacific Garbage Patch

There is a ton of plastic in our oceans – millions of metric tons of it, actually. [A study released in February](#) found that every year, about 8 million metric tons of plastic get dumped into oceans worldwide, and that number is [likely to go up](#). (For much more background on this disturbing truth, see *Rolling Stone's* 2009 feature ["An Ocean of Plastic."](#))

The problem has gotten so bad that there's actually something called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch – also known as the Pacific trash vortex – which is more or less exactly what it sounds like. Although [it doesn't actually look like a nightmarish trash island from space](#), the phenomenon should be worrisome to all of us. Microplastics mix with larger debris items to make the water into a kind of "soup" that can be [lethal for marine life](#).

5. Rising Sea Levels

The Republic of Maldives is made up of about 1,200 islands off the coast of India, most of which are uninhabited. It is also ground zero for the direct effects of climate change and rising sea levels. In 2004, the country was devastated by the tsunami that wreaked havoc over the Indian subcontinent. Though that event wasn't linked directly to climate change, it showed just how vulnerable this island nation is to environmental disaster.

The Maldives are only about two meters above sea level, and as polar ice caps melt and sea levels rise there's fear that the country could simply sink into the ocean. Back in 2009, the Maldivian government [held a cabinet meeting underwater](#) in protest during the Copenhagen climate conference. If ocean levels rise by three feet, the country could be [almost completely underwater by 2100](#).

The problem isn't just limited to small island nations, either. A recent paper by James Hansen and 16 other scientists warned that even if countries worldwide are able to slow global warming to the ambitious level of two degrees Celsius above pre-1900 levels, [we could still be in for disaster](#). Hitting that target could still leave places like New York City, London and Bangladesh completely uninhabitable. The study hasn't been peer reviewed, and has received some criticism in the scientific community, but the thrust of the argument – that much more needs to be done even to mitigate some of the most dire predictions – is hard to argue with.



A lone houseboat beside an almost dry section of the Shasta Lake reservoir which is now at less than 20 percent capacity as a severe drought continues to affect California on May 25th, 2015. Mark Ralston/AFP/Getty

6. Drought in California

Sometimes you have too much water, sometimes too little. We're four years into California's drought and there's no telling when it will end. The problem has gotten so bad that thousands of residents in California's Central Valley have no running water. Andrew Lockman, manager of the county's Office of Emergency Services, [told Mother Jones](#) that as of July, 5,433 people didn't have running water, and that many of the hardest hit are poor. "Most of those individuals live in East Porterville, a small farming community in the Sierra Foothills," that story reported. "East Porterville is one of the poorest communities in California: over a third of the population lives below the federal poverty line, and 56 percent of adults didn't make it through high school."

One small bit of good news is that statewide water use in June [declined by 27 percent](#), even better than the 25 percent goal set by Governor Jerry Brown. Still, some of the rich areas – looking at you, Beverly Hills – didn't meet their goals. In a widely ridiculed story from earlier this summer, some of California's wealthiest residents told a reporter for the *Washington Post* that ["we're not all equal when it comes to water."](#)

Water scarcity goes beyond California, too. A recent study from NASA satellite data shows that of Earth's 37 largest underground aquifers, 21 have been [depleted beyond their point of sustainability](#). That stress could leave millions with diminishing access to fresh water.

7. Mass Extinction on the Way?

[A new study](#) finds that Earth is facing a sixth mass extinction that human beings are responsible for. The [worst mass extinction in the planet's history](#) happened 250 million years ago and killed off 96 percent of marine



species and 70 percent of land species. Now, we're losing mammals species at "20 to 100 times the rate of the past," [as the Washington Post put it](#). "These estimates reveal an exceptionally rapid loss of biodiversity over the last few centuries, indicating that a sixth mass extinction is already under way," the authors of the study conclude.

8. Climate Change Is Already Making the World More Dangerous

The Pentagon recently issued a report to Congress on the effects climate change is having on security worldwide, and the findings are not encouraging. "Global climate change will have wide-ranging implications for U.S. national security interests over the foreseeable future because it will aggravate existing problems – such as poverty, social tensions, environmental degradation, ineffectual leadership, and weak political institutions – that threaten domestic stability in a number of countries," [the report states](#).

Some scholars have even argued that resource scarcity due to climate change is partly – though obviously not entirely – to blame for the Syrian civil war and [the rise of ISIS](#). An extreme drought from 2007 to 2010 led about [1.5 million Syrians](#) to migrate from rural areas into cities, worsening tensions with the government of Bashar al-Assad.

9. Scientists Aren't Being Honest About How Screwed We Are

Everything about climate change is depressing, but, bizarrely, many scientists often couch their findings in ways that don't clarify just how awful the situation truly is. That's what journalist David Roberts argued in [a post for Vox](#) this May that laid out the various pressures – professional, political, social – that lead experts to all too often tell politicians and the public at large what they want to hear, rather than the terrible truth.

Whether researchers build in overly optimistic (read: impossible) levels of cooperation between countries into their models, or rely on technology that doesn't yet exist to solve our problems, the result, says Roberts, is "that *no one* has much incentive to break the bad news."

Every day the world doesn't end in an apocalypse of floods and earthquakes, it gets easier for us to think the planet is basically fine. That means that things are very likely going to get worse before they get any better.