

The fate of the Earth

Climate change, after all, looks to be nature's slo-mo version of nuclear war.

By [Tom Engelhardt](#) - January 27, 2020



Image credit: Pixabay

Let me betray my age for a moment. Some of you, I know, will be shocked, but I still read an actual newspaper. Words on real paper every day. I'm talking about the *New York Times*, and something stuck with me from the January 9th edition of that "paper" paper. Of course, in the world of the Internet, that's already ancient history—medieval times—but (as a reminder) it came only a few days after Donald Trump's drone assassination of Iranian Major General Qassem Suleimani.

So you won't be surprised to learn that its [front page](#) was essentially all Iran and The Donald. Atop it, there was a large photo of the president heading for a podium with his generals and

officials lined up on either side of him. Its caption read: "The United States is ready to embrace peace with all who seek it,' President Trump said Wednesday at the White House." Beside it, the lead story was headlined "U.S. and Iranians Lower Tensions, at Least for Now." Below were three more Iran-related pieces, taking up much of the rest of the page. ("A President's Mixed Messages Unsettle More Than Reassure," etc.)

At the bottom left, there was a fifth Iran-related article. Inside that 24-page section of the paper, there were seven more full pages of coverage on the subject. Only one other piece of hot news could be squeezed (with photo) onto the bottom right of the front page. And whether you still read

actual papers or now live only in the world of the Internet, I doubt you'll be shocked to learn that it focused on Meghan Markle and Prince Harry, already involved in a crisis among the British Royals that was almost Iranian in its intensity. The headline: "In Stunning Step, Duke and Duchess Seek New Title: Part-Timers."

Had you then followed the "continued on page A5" below that piece, you would have found the rest of the story about the Duke and Duchess of Sussex (including a second photo of them and an ad for Bloomingdales, the department store) taking up almost all of that inside page. If, however, you had been in a particularly attentive mood, you might also have noticed, squeezed in at the very bottom left of page 5, an [11-paragraph story](#) by Henry Fountain. It had been granted so little space that the year 2019 had to be abbreviated as '19 in its headline, which read in full: "'19 Was the 2nd-Hottest Year, And July Hottest Month Yet."

Of course, that literally qualified as the hottest story of the day, but you never would have known it. It began this way:

"The evidence mounted all year. Temperature records were broken in France, Germany and elsewhere; the Greenland ice sheet experienced exceptional melting; and, as 2019 came to a close, broiling temperatures contributed to devastating wildfires that continue in Australia. Now European scientists have confirmed what had been suspected: 2019 was a very hot year, with global average temperatures the second highest on record. Only 2016 was hotter, and not by much—less than one-tenth of a degree Fahrenheit."

As Fountain pointed out, however briefly, among the records broken in 2019, "The past five years have been the five warmest on record" (as had the last decade).

In another world, either that line or the actual headline should reasonably have been atop that *Times* front page in blazing letters. After all, that's the news that someday could do us all in,

whatever happens in Iran or to the British royal family. In my own dreamscape, that piece, headlined atop the front page, would have been continued on the obituary page. After all, the climate crisis could someday deliver an obituary for humanity and so many other living things on this planet, or at least for the way of life we humans have known throughout our history.

If you live online and were looking hard, you could have stumbled on the same news, thanks, say, to a similar [CNN report](#) on the subject, but it wasn't the equivalent of headlines there either. Just another hot year... bleh. Who's going to pay real attention when war with Iran lurks just beneath the surface and Harry and Meghan are heading for Canada?

To give credit where it's due, however, a week later when that climate news was confirmed by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, as well as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, it did finally hit the [front page](#) of the January 16th edition of the paper *Times*. Of course, I wouldn't be writing this if it had been the day's blazing headline, but that honor went to impeachment proceedings and a photo of the solemn walk of the seven House impeachment managers, as well as the clerk and sergeant-at-arms, delivering those articles to the Senate.

That photo and two stories about impeachment dominated the top of the page. Trump's "phase 1" trade deal with China got the mid-page area and various other stories ("Warren Confronts the Skeptics Who Fear Her Plans Go Too Far") were at page bottom. Stuck between the impeachment headlines and the Warren story was, however, a little insert. You might think of it as the news equivalent of a footnote. It had a tiny chart of global temperatures, 1880 to 2019, a micro-headline ("Warmer and Warmer"), and a note that read: "In the latest sign of global warming's grip on the planet, the past decade was the hottest on record, researchers said. Page A8." And, indeed, on that page was Henry Fountain's [latest story](#) on the subject.

As it happened, between the 9th and 16th of January, yet more news about our heating planet had come out that, in a sense, was even grimmer. A new analysis found that the oceans, sinkholes for the heat trapped by greenhouse gas emissions, had [also experienced](#) their hottest five years on record (ditto for the last decade). In their case, however, 2019 was the very hottest, not the second hottest, year so far. And that, too, was a [Times story](#), but only online.

Two kinds of time

Now, I don't want you to misunderstand me here. The *New York Times* is anything but a climate change-denying newspaper. It has some superb environmental and global-warming coverage (including [of Australia](#) recently) by top-of-the-line journalists like [Somini Sengupta](#). It's in no way like Fox News or the rest of Rupert Murdoch's fervently climate-denying media organization that happens to control [more than 70%](#) of newspaper circulation in burning Australia.

The situation I've been describing is, I suspect, far more basic and human than that and—my guess—it has to do with time. The time all of us are generally plunged into is, naturally enough, human time, which has a certain obvious immediacy for us—the immediacy, you might say, of everyday life. In human time, for instance, an autocratic-minded showman like Donald Trump can rise to the presidency, be impeached, and fall, or be impeached, stay in office, and pass on his “legacy” to his children until something new comes along to make its mark, fail or end in its own fashion, and go the way of... well, of all of us. That's human history, again and again.

And then there's the time-scape of global warming, which exists on a scale hard for us mortals to truly take in. After all, whatever Donald Trump might do won't last long, not really—with two possible exceptions: the use of nuclear weapons in an apocalyptic fashion or the help he's [offering](#) fossil-fuel companies in putting yet more greenhouse gas emissions into

the atmosphere, while working to [limit](#) the development of alternative energy, both of which will only make the climate crisis to come yet more severe.

Otherwise, his time is all too human. With our normally far less than century-long life spans, we are, in the end, such immediate creatures. Climate change, even though human-caused, works on another scale entirely. Once its effects are locked in, we're not just talking about 2100 or 2150, dates hard enough for us to get our brains (no less our policy-making) around, but hundreds of years, even [millennia](#). Though we've known about climate change for [many decades](#) now, we're dealing with a time scale that our brains simply aren't prepared to fully take in.

When weighing an Iranian drone assassination or a presidential impeachment or the latest development in election 2020 against news of the long-term transformation of this planet, no matter how disastrous, the immediate tends to win out, whether you're a *New York Times* editor or just about anyone else.

It shouldn't be surprising, then, that it's been so difficult to truly grasp the import of the warming of this planet, because its effects have, until now, generally been relatively subtle or challenging to grasp. When The Donald is in the White House or Harry and Meghan cause a stir or an Iranian major general is assassinated, that's riveting, graspable, headlines. Those heating waters, those warming temperatures, the [bleaching](#) of coral reefs, the melting of ice shields in [Greenland](#), the [Arctic](#), and the [Antarctic](#) leading to rising sea levels that could one day [drown](#) coastal cities, maybe not so much, not deep down, not where it truly counts.

The burning

The real question is: When will climate change truly enter human time—when, that is, will the two time scales intersect in a way that clicks? Perhaps (but just perhaps) we're finally seeing the beginning of an answer to that question for which you would, I suspect, have to thank two

phenomena: [Greta Thunberg](#) and Australia's fires.

In August 2018, all alone, the 15-year-old Thunberg [began](#) a Friday school strike in front of the Swedish parliament in Stockholm to make a point: that however all-encompassing the present human moment might seem, she understood in a way that mattered how her future and that of her peers was being stolen by the adults in charge of this planet and the climate crisis they were continuing to feed. The movement of the young she sparked, one that's still sparking, was a living, breathing version of those two times intersecting. In other words, she somehow grasped and transmitted in a compelling way how a future crisis of staggering proportions was being nailed in place in human time, right at that very moment.

And then, of course, there was—there is—Australia. But one more thing before I get to the devastation of that country. I began writing this piece in New York City on a weekend in January when the temperature hit a record-breaking [65-69 degrees](#), depending on where in the metropolitan area you were measuring. (A couple of hundred miles north in Boston, it hit [74 degrees](#)!) It was glorious, spring-like, idyllic, everything a human being in “winter” could want—if, that is, you hadn't made it past Meghan and Harry or Suleimani and Trump, and so didn't have a sense of what such records might mean on a planet threatening to heat to the [boiling point](#) in the coming century. We're talking, of course, about a world in which Donald Trump and crew were responding to climate change by attempting to open the taps on every kind of fossil fuel and the [greenhouse gas emissions](#) that go with their burning. Meanwhile, despite the news that, by 2100, parts of the North China plain with its hundreds of millions of inhabitants could be [too hot](#) for habitation, China's leaders were still pushing a global Belt and Road Initiative that involves the building of [at least 63](#) new coal-fired power plants in [23 countries](#). Huzzah! And remember that China and the United States are

already the [top two](#) emitters of greenhouse gases.

Of course, tell that to the Australians whose country, by the way, is the world's [third largest exporter](#) of fossil fuels. For the last month or more, it's also been a climate-change disaster area of a previously unimaginable sort. Even if you haven't taken in the acreage that fire has already destroyed (estimated to be [the size of](#) South Korea or the state of Virginia)—fire that, by the way, is [making its own](#) weather—you've certainly seen the coverage of the [dead](#) or [hurt](#) koalas and roos, right? Maybe you've even seen the [estimate](#) by one scientist—[no way](#) to confirm it yet—that a billion creatures (yes, 1,000,000,000) might *already* have died in those fires and it's still not the height of the Australian summer or fire season.

In some fashion, as a climate-change disaster, Australia seems to have broken through. (It probably doesn't hurt that it has all those cute, endangered animals.) Looking back, we earthlings may someday conclude that, with Greta and with Australia burning, the climate crisis finally began breaking into human time. Yes, there was that less than Edenic November of 2018 in [Paradise, California](#), and there have been other weather disasters, including hurricanes [Maria](#) and [Dorian](#), that undoubtedly were heightened by climate-change, but Australia may be the first time that the climate-change time-scape and human history have intersected in a way that truly mattered.

And although, in the midst of winter, this country isn't burning, we do have something else in common with those Australians: a nation being run by arsonists, by [genuine pyromaniacs](#). After all, earlier in his coal-fired career, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison [brought](#) a literal lump of coal into that country's parliament, soothingly reassuring the other members that “this is coal. Don't be afraid. Don't be scared.”

In the election he won in 2019 (against a Labor Party promoting action on [climate change](#)), he

[was](#) in big coal's back pocket. And like our president, his government has been [messing](#) with international attempts to deal with the climate crisis ever since. Again like our president, he's also been an open denier of the very reality of climate change and so one of a crew of right-wing [global leaders](#) seemingly intent on setting this planet afire.

Climate-change previews?

Years ago, in my apartment building, someone dozed off while smoking in bed, starting a fire a couple of floors below me. I noticed only when the smoke began filtering under my door. Opening it, I found the hall filled with smoke. Heading downstairs wasn't an option. In fact, a couple who had tried to do so were trapped on my floor and I quickly took them in. I barely had time to panic, however, before I heard the sirens of the first fire engines. Not long after, the doorbell rang and two firemen were there, instructing me to open all the windows and stuff towels at the bottom of the door to keep the smoke out. I'm sure I've never been so happy to greet someone at my door.

That fire was, in the end, contained inside the apartment where it started and I was in no danger, but peering into that smoke-filled hallway I would never have known it. The memory of that long-lost afternoon came back to me in the context of burning Australia, a country where fire

fighters had been desperately at work for weeks without being able to douse the hundreds of blazes across that [drought-stricken](#) land, which has also recently experienced [record](#) high temperatures. It's been the definition of a living nightmare.

And here's what I began to wonder on this newest version of planet Earth: Are we all in some sense Australians, whether we know it or not? I don't mean that as an empathetic statement of solidarity with the suffering people of that land (though I do feel for them). I mean it as a statement of grim fact. Admittedly, it won't be fire for all of us. For some, it will be rising sea levels, flooding of a never-before-experienced sort, storms or heat waves of a previously unimagined ferocity, and so on.

Still, right now, Australia is our petri dish and unless we get rid of the arsonists who are running too many countries and figure out a way to come together in human time, we're likely to enter a world where there will be no fire fighters to save us (or our children and grandchildren). Climate change, after all, looks to be nature's slo-mo version of nuclear war.

In movie terms, think of Australia as the previews. For most of us, the main feature is still to come. The problem is that the schedule for that feature may not be found in your local paper.