

Welcome to the Era of Climate Change-Induced PTSD

A writer reflects on the trauma of watching Alaska disappear in real time.

By *Dahr Jamail* DECEMBER 10, 2019



An iceberg melts in Kulusuk Bay, eastern Greenland, in 2007. (AP Photo / John McConnico)

Recently, I was in Homer, Alaska, to talk about my book *The End of Ice*. Seconds after I had thanked those who brought me to the small University of Alaska campus there, overwhelmed with some mix of sadness, love, and grief about my adopted state—and the planet generally—I wept.

I tried to speak but could only apologize and take a few moments to collect myself. It's challenging for me, even now, to explain the wash of emotions and thoughts that suddenly swept over me as I stood at that podium on a warm, windy, rainy night on the southern Kenai Peninsula

among a group ready to learn more about what was happening to our beloved Earth.

“Sorry for that,” I finally said after a few more breaths, as my voice cracked with emotion, “but I know you’ll understand. You live in this state and you know as well as I do that once Alaska gets in your blood, it stays there. And I love this place with all my heart.” Most of the listeners in that room were already nodding and at least one person had begun to cry.

I lived in Alaska for a decade, starting in 1996, and it's been in my blood since the year before that when I first laid eyes on Denali National

Park and the spectacular Alaska Range. In fact, five of the nine chapters of my new book are set in Alaska and its mournful title is a kind of bow to my abiding love for this country's northernmost state. That moment in 1995 when the clouds literally parted to reveal Denali's lofty summit and its spectacular spread of glaciers proved to be love at first sight. In fact, most summers thereafter I would visit that range as well as others in Alaska, volcanoes in Mexico, the Karakorum Himalaya of South Asia, or the South American Andes.

Then, in the summer of 2003, several months after the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, I listened to radio reports on the beginning of the grim American occupation of that land from a tent on Denali while volunteering with the Park Service. It was there as well, strangely enough, that I first felt the pull of Iraq—or rather of the gaping void in the mainstream media when it came to what that occupation was doing to the Iraqi people. I then decided to travel from ice to heat, from Denali to the Middle East, to find out what was happening there and report on it.

That strange mountainside call led me into a career in journalism that pulled me away from my beloved Alaska whose vastnesses, largely devoid of a human presence, I've never experienced elsewhere. And as far as I traveled from its unique landscape, the feeling that the climate was already being disrupted in dramatic ways there stuck with me through my years of war reporting. The thought of the ever-receding glaciers in my former home state pained me and somehow drew me from America's forever wars to another kind of war—on the planet itself—and into nearly a decade of climate reporting.

I told the audience all of this, occasionally pausing so as not to cry again thanks to a sadness born in part from the convulsions of wildfires, droughts, rapidly thawing permafrost, native coastal villages melting into the seas, and fast-shrinking glaciers. And don't forget a Trumpian lapdog of a governor who, just like his darling

president, seems unable to cut services fast enough or work hard enough to open yet more of this great state to drilling, logging, and pollution (despite his growing unpopularity).

The evening before, November 20, I'd spoken at the University of Alaska in Anchorage and it was 48 degrees Fahrenheit (and raining, not snowing), a full 20 degrees warmer than the normal high temperature for that month. And that's a reality that has become ever more the new normal there, even though the top third of the state lies inside the Arctic Circle. That, in turn, reflects another new reality: "Arctic amplification," which means that the higher latitudes of this planet are warming roughly twice as fast as the mid-latitudes. In other words, Alaska is in the crosshairs of climate disruption.

Put another way, the audiences I was speaking to that month and all of my friends in Alaska are now living in what feels like a chronic state of shock as things unravel in their state at warp speed.

ALASKA, THE NEW NORM

It's no secret that vast numbers of climate scientists are now grieving for the planet and humanity's future, with some even describing their symptoms as a climate-change version of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Several of the scientists I interviewed for my book said as much. Dan Fagre, who works for the United States Geological Survey at Glacier National Park, was typical. When I asked him what he felt like while watching the glaciers (for which that park was named) disappear—they are expected to be gone by 2030—he responded, "It's like being a battle-hardened soldier, but on a philosophical basis, it's tough to watch the thing you study disappear."

And it's not just climate scientists like him. Others living near areas where the changes are happening most dramatically seem to be experiencing such symptoms as well. "You wouldn't believe what it was like to be in

Anchorage last summer,” my friend Matt Rafferty told me when we met in that city on the morning I returned from Homer. “We saw 90 degrees on July 4th and then, later in the summer, the wildfire smoke was so thick on some days you literally could not see across the street downtown.”

An environmentalist who has long been working to protect Alaska from the extraction vultures, Matt is, like me, in love with the natural beauty of the place. I’ve traveled with him to the remote Alaskan backcountry and think of him as upbeat and indefatigable when it comes to his work, whatever the odds of success. But listening to him describe the climate convulsions wracking his home state recently, I couldn’t help but think of interviews I had done with family members in Iraq who had lost loved ones to US military attacks. People with PTSD—and I know this from my own personal experience with it—tend to repetitively tell stories about the trauma they’ve experienced. It’s our way of trying to process it.

And this was exactly what Matt, normally not a guy given to overemphasis, was doing that morning, which shocked me. “We had rivers in south-central Alaska that were so warm the salmon were dying of heart attacks,” he continued, barely stopping to take a breath. “The river water reached 80 degrees in some of them! The water was 80 degrees! Can you believe that? There were literally tens of thousands of dead salmon floating belly up in many of the rivers. I did a pack-raft trip in the Talkeetna Mountains wearing nothing but a T-shirt and shorts! That is absurd! You know how cold the water usually is in the rivers here. It literally got so hot in the sun we had to pull out and sit underneath a tree in the shade!”

He recounted much that I already knew, including that Arctic sea ice had melted away at record speed and that, by the fall, permafrost was thawing at rates not predicted for another 70 years. On the coast of the Arctic Ocean in

northern Alaska, whaling towns that traditionally used permafrost cellars to store, age, and keep their subsistence food cool throughout the year—the Inupiat use them for tons of whale and walrus meat—now find them pooling with water and sprouting mold thanks to the thawing permafrost.

By that September, Matt told me, he was struggling with depression. “I lost all hope, as it truly felt apocalyptic here,” he continued more slowly and quietly now, rubbing one of his arms in what I imagined was a sort of self-consoling gesture. Spending more time meditating, doing yoga, and finding helpful spiritual podcasts has, he added, become mandatory for him—and he’s far from alone in that among Alaskans as southern weather is visibly migrating north.

That day in Anchorage, I stopped at my favorite bookstore to check out the latest volumes on the state. One of them, *Alone at the Top: Climbing Denali in the Dead of Winter*, caught my eye. Arctic explorer Lonnie Dupre had made history in 2015 by summiting Denali in January... solo. It was an incredible feat that he writes about in his book, but the moment I won’t forget was when he described being trapped in his tent on that mountain at 11,200 feet during a storm that raged for days. At one point, he heard what sounded like small rocks pelting the tent, unzipped the door, poked his head out, and was shocked to find that, on December 31st, it was sleeting, not snowing. We’re talking about a moment when the average temperature for that elevation should have been something like 35 degrees below zero.

It hurt my heart to know that such weather paroxysms were afflicting even Denali, a mountain, standing so high and so near the Arctic Circle, that changed my life by drawing me to Alaska when I was in my t20s. Despite everything I now know, it still stunned me.

And here I am, like my close friends in that state, telling this story to anyone who will listen. I know this will sound over the top to non-Alaskan readers, but even writing this brings tears to my

eyes. It's simply not supposed to be this way. Just about nothing that's happening there, climatologically speaking, today is what we once would have thought of as "natural," even though it's now the new norm.

Hearing so many of these stories while visiting proved too much to take in, as did knowing what's now starting to happen to salmon, bears, moose, and other wildlife of all sorts. Thanks to chaotic climatic shifts, such creatures are beginning to migrate from what once were their home territories due to lack of familiar food. And all of it is, in its own way, traumatizing.

During a recent lecture at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, Rick Thoman, a climate specialist at the Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy, presented a grim overview of radically changed conditions across our northernmost state. In his 30 years with the National Weather Service in Alaska, Thoman has watched as the climate in his home state was disrupted by the anthropogenic climate crisis. Originally from Pennsylvania, he told the audience how reading about such a different world in works that ranged from Jack London's turn-of-the-20th-century short story "To Build a Fire" to Barry Lopez's book *Arctic Dreams* had led him to Alaska. London, for instance, had written about a place in which minus-70-degree temperatures were part of everyday life. "But the fact of the matter is," he told us grimly, "the environment described in these books doesn't exist anymore." He added, "That's really hard. But it's what we've got, it's what we live in."

Thoman spoke of how, thanks to radically warming waters, the Bering Sea is literally experiencing a mass exodus of marine life, while the state itself is, like a beloved friend, in the midst of a health crisis that no one in power is truly trying to treat.

No wonder all of this leaves me with a feeling of utter impotence. Each new weather shock feels like another body blow. Or yet further evidence of how I'm losing a loved one. Alaska, in other

words, is suffering climate death by a thousand cuts, while I struggle daily to accept the new reality: that the state is already irreparably changed.

RAINBOW PEAK

Deep waves of love and sadness had already begun coursing through me as my flight descended into Anchorage when this trip began. And such feelings only continued during the time I spent there. Time with old climbing buddies proved bittersweet, as it was never long before we couldn't help but speak of the changes already occurring, even as we planned future forays into Alaska's mountains.

The last full day, I knew I needed to be alone in those mountains. I'd brought the necessary gear with me for late-November hiking temperatures, or at least for the way I remembered them from the years when I lived there: crampons, an ice axe, extra layers of warm clothing for deep snow and mountain temperatures that should have been in the teens (even without taking the wind-chill factor into account).

Before sunrise that day, I headed south from Anchorage on the Seward highway as it dropped down beside the waters of Turnagain Arm. I was heading for a trail that would take me into the Chugach Mountains, one of my old stomping grounds.

Delicate pastel blues and soft buttery yellows illuminated the sky ahead as the lazy winter sun rose. While snow still covered the tops of the surrounding mountains, lower down the colors on them faded from bright whites to browns and greens—hardly a surprise, since temperatures here have been so warm and snow so scarce in this year's disrupted lead-up to winter.

I passed several areas where, in the mid-1990s, I would already have been ice-climbing atop frozen waterfalls at this time of year. Now, they were visibly bone dry with temperatures too warm for ice to form.

After arriving at my trailhead, I hiked alone toward a nearby peak. Out of habit, I began with a heavy jacket on, but soon removed it, along with my gloves, in temperatures well above freezing. I wasn't used to this and it felt abidingly strange to alter my old habits as I climbed.

I gained elevation quickly. Within a couple of hours, I was in something that finally seemed Alaskan to me, genuine winter conditions as I post-holed through the snow—which means having your legs regularly break through the surface snow to perhaps knee- or mid-thigh-height—making my way toward the summit. I paused from time to time to breathe in the smell of the trees and watch the occasional snow flurry flutter down into the valley below.

The summit ridge was blanketed in snow. As I arrived there, I suddenly realized that I had been chasing winter—that is, my own past life and dreams—up these mountains on this last full day

of my visit, seeking to find an Alaska that no longer was.

I marveled at the grand 360-degree view, taking photos of the snowy peaks around me, drinking it all in, before I had to descend and head back to my home in Washington State and back to a climate-changed present on a burning planet where I would continue to dream of the Alaska I had once known. I knew I would be planning future ascents here, while at least some of it remains as it once was.

Shortly before boarding my flight home from the Anchorage airport, the cloud cover to the north cleared, revealing Denali's still majestic white silhouette against a dark blue backdrop. I stood there, transfixed, for nearly half an hour unable to take my eyes off that mountain. Only when it began to grow dark and Denali was no longer visible could I allow myself to walk off, even as I wiped away more tears.

Dahr Jamail, a *TomDispatch* regular, is a recipient of numerous honors, including the Martha Gellhorn Award for Journalism for his work in Iraq and the Izzy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Independent Media in 2018. He is the author, most recently, of *The End of Ice* (The New Press). He is also the author of *Beyond the Green Zone* and *The Will to Resist*.