

How will we adapt to a climate changed world?

Menu



Source: Studio Roosgarde WaterLich

Rising tides: a view from dry land

Clay Reynolds looks back to his childhood to consider how a climate-changed world will be entirely different but populated with people like us.

Growing up on the semi-arid prairies of West Texas, I didn't care much about sea-levels. As a boy, I never saw a river I couldn't walk across, although becoming stuck in quicksand or victimized by some random vermin or other while breaking through the wild-plum thickets along the sandy banks of our neighborhood creek and riverbeds was a threat. When I first saw the Mississippi, I couldn't believe it. These times of my childhood where I grew up were the years of drought. It lasted seven years, actually, so oceanic waters meant little to me. Although as an infant my family visited California and, I was told, spent time on the beach, I have no memory of the Pacific. I didn't even see the Gulf of Mexico until I was twelve, and the Atlantic wasn't in my experience for another decade.

So the whole idea of rising ocean levels is hard for me to imagine, even now, and even after I've lived on the coast for ten years and been on ships at sea. I've walked the seawalls of major cities that border oceans, and I'm sensitive to the power of rising tides, but it's an intellectual rather than an emotional perception. I am still, I guess, emotionally on dry land.

Years ago I saw a documentary about divers exploring the drowned remains of some ancient city. The presumption was that an earthquake had opened the entire city to the bay that wrapped around it, submerging it suddenly and completely to a depth of twenty or thirty feet. The cameras showed divers swimming into and out of doorways and around columns of ancient, forgotten buildings, once home to an active and large population. The sensation of watching this film stayed with me. It was more than the ghostly exploration of a dead city, more than the speculation of what happened to the people who once walked these streets and lived in these sunken structures. It reminded me that Nature has little regard for the pitiful etchings of mankind. When Atlas, so to speak, more or less shifts his weight, just a little, the world shifts with it, and prairies buckle, mountains crumble, oceans rise.

The two-meter rise of the oceans forecast by the dark prophets of science is not something, though, to be casually regarded. Man's refusal to respect and preserve the planet/garden where he exists is the cause of this, they say and I believe. I have seen reports of soot-covered glaciers, of the diminished ice-packs in Greenland, Antarctica, the rapidly disappearing rain forests, and I've felt desperately sad, even a little bit afraid. I note that recently, a cruise ship traversed the previously impenetrable Northwest Passage, which, triumphant an achievement as that may be, signals a crisis with polar ice. I worry about that, and I worry about polar bears and penguins and whales and other creatures of the sea that rely on the stability of oceans to survive.

Water rising two meters doesn't sound like much. In American terms, that's a couple of yards. But the global impact of that on low-lying cities such as New York or San Francisco, Boston and Charleston, Miami and Mobile, and most certainly New Orleans and Corpus Christi would be horrific. And that's just in the U.S. In more than a minor way such a rise would remap the coastlines of all the continents. And while it might not sink entire cities, it could change their perimeters, force them to face ruination and disappearance of their most precious icons and landmarks.

The focus of the media when they deign to talk about this in serious terms is the economic impact, of course. Loss of property would be one—oceanfront is prime real estate almost anywhere—and certainly loss of business from shipping, fishing, and other seaside enterprises. Tourism would be affected; the famous beaches where people go to frolic and take the sun and surf would be altered in dynamic ways.

But apart from the grim and somewhat temporal realities, there is the emotional impact of all of this. It's our fault. It's our problem to fix, and we do nothing about it, not really.

When I was a boy in my drought-stricken homeland, I remember that some people came "to town," which is how it was phrased, driving animal-drawn conveyances. Mules and horses pulled carriages and wagons into the "wagon-park" that was behind the main buildings of Main Street and across from the depot. I was five or six at the time, but it seemed perfectly normal to me. I understood that they weren't doing this to be quaint; this was their principal form of transportation. I'm not that old. This was only sixty years ago in rural West Texas. But we have moved from that to automobiles so entirely, I'd speculate that in that same county today, no more than a fraction of the population has ever ridden in, let alone driven, a mule or horse-drawn wagon. We've come that far.

As I sit here and compose this on an electronic machine, comfortably cooled by air conditioning, knowing that in a while, I'll fire up my vehicle and drive into the city where I will teach a class in a comfortably chilled classroom bathed in electric light and enhanced by electronic devices, I don't pause and marvel at the progress that has been made in the past six decades. But I do worry that maybe the price of that progress may be measured in meters, the measurement of the rise of the oceans.

I think there are two truths here: High tide is coming, and there is nothing we can do to stop it, as we lack the collective will to truly assess our carelessness and count the cost or to try, even, to reverse the slide toward submersion. And in time, I suspect, divers will be exploring the drowned ruins of our civilization. The question then, is if there will still be people high enough and dry enough to care.

 **Reynolds** is a writer who has authored more than a thousand publications ranging from academic articles and essays to award-winning short fiction and novels. A native of Texas, he is Professor of Arts and Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas.

 * This vision was in the "Life plus 2m" prompt at , which carries out weekly, peer-reviewed writing competitions.



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