

Now we have a moral duty to talk about climate change

By Mark Lynas



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On search and rescue mission with US Navy 01:31

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(CNN) This is what climate change looks like. Entire metropolitan areas -- [Houston in the United States and Mumbai in India](#) -- submerged in catastrophic floods.

Record-breaking rainfall: [Harvey's 50-plus inches](#) of torrential deluge set a new national tropical cyclone rain record for the continental United States.

They used to make Hollywood disaster movies about this sort of thing. Now it's just the news.



As tragedy unfolds, Trump faces test of counselor-in-chief

Officials as senior as [Kellyanne Conway](#), counselor to President Donald Trump, have suggested that now -- during a natural disaster -- is not the time to raise the divisive and highly politicized issue of global warming. But if not now, when? After the waters subside, the news crews pack up, and the long task of rebuilding begins, the world's attention inevitably moves on.

Watching Trump tour the flooded areas, I was reminded of his [Rose Garden press conference](#) less than three months ago announcing the US withdrawal from the Paris climate treaty. In that act of wanton international vandalism, Trump was helping condemn millions more people to the threat of intensified extreme events in future decades.

It is not politically opportunistic to raise this issue now. Instead we have a moral duty not to accept the attempted conspiracy of silence imposed by powerful political and business interests opposed to any reduction in the use of fossil fuels. We owe this to the

people of Texas as much to those of Bangladesh and India, and Niger -- which was also struck by disastrous flooding this week. Climate disasters demonstrate our collective humanity and interdependence. We have to help each other out -- in the short term by saving lives and in the longer term by cutting greenhouse gases and enhancing resilience, especially in developing countries.



Conway spars with Cuomo over Harvey 01:57

No, of course climate change did not "cause" Harvey in any singular sense. Nor does smoking definitively "cause" any individual case of lung cancer. Smoking increases the risk of cancer, just as increased global warming increases the risk of extreme rainfall events.

This is not scientifically controversial. There is a straightforward physical relationship between a warming atmosphere and extreme rainfall potential.

Hotter air can hold more water vapor. And hotter water can provide the fuel for more intense tropical storms.

Yes, the vagaries of the weather played a part. Harvey stalled close enough to the Texas coast to continue drawing in tropical air from the Gulf of Mexico that was supercharged with moisture.

But the climate change fingerprint is undeniable, too. Sea surface temperatures across the Gulf on August 23, just before Harvey made landfall in Texas, [were ominously warm](#), 1.5 to 4 degrees Celsius (2.7 to 7.2 F) hotter than the average of a few decades ago. These warm waters helped Harvey develop from a mere tropical depression to a Category 4 hurricane in just 48 hours.

If disasters ever have a silver lining, it is that they bring us together. Witness how ordinary people risked their lives to save others as the floodwaters rose around Houston. These were not unusual heroes; they were just normal people doing what they knew was right.

In life-threatening situations our human empathy swamps our day-to-day divisions of politics, nationality or religion. In South Asia, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is already supporting 200,000 [people in direst need of food and shelter](#). Somehow, we need to find a way to extend our capacity to empathize and support each other across political and social divides in the long term. If climate change remains as politically toxic as it is today in America, we will never be able to address it properly. We all have a duty to confront denial and speak out. If we fail, the Harveys, Katrinas and Sandys of the future will be even worse than the storms we experience today. And in the future, as now, each subsequent climate disaster will just be "news." Surely we can do better than that.