

Opinion: How to live with climate change

By Bjorn Lomborg

One of the scarier predictions about global warming is the suggestion that melting glaciers and ice caps could cause sea levels to rise as much as 15 to 20 feet over the next century. Set aside the fact that the best research we have – from the United Nations climate panel – says that global sea levels are not likely to rise more than about 20 inches by 2100. Rather, let's imagine that over the next 80 or 90 years, a giant port city – say, Tokyo – found itself engulfed by a sea-level rise of about 15 feet. Millions of inhabitants would be imperiled, along with trillions of dollars' worth of infrastructure. Without a vast global effort, could we cope with such a terrifying catastrophe? Well, we already have. In fact, we're doing it right now.

Since 1930, excessive ground water withdrawal has caused Tokyo to subside by as much as 15 feet. Similar subsidence has occurred over the past century in numerous cities, including Tianjin, Shanghai, Osaka, Bangkok and Jakarta. And in each case, the city has managed to protect itself from such large relative sea-level rises without much difficulty.

The process is called adaptation, and it's something we humans are very good at. That isn't surprising, since we've been doing it for millennia. As climate economist Richard Tol notes, our ability to adapt to widely varying climates explains how people live happily at both the equator and the poles. In the debate over global warming, in which some have argued that civilization as we know it is at stake, this is an important point. Humankind is not completely at the mercy of nature. To the contrary, when it comes to dealing with the impact of climate change, we've compiled a pretty impressive

track record. While this doesn't mean we can afford to ignore climate change, it provides a powerful reason not to panic about it either.

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