

Doomsday narratives about climate change don't work. But here's what does

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Feeling hopeless about a situation is cognitively associated with . Instead of being defeatist, look to climate change heroes who are leading the way



Fishermen plant mangroves in Aceh Indonesia to reduce coastal abrasion. Photograph: Oviyandi / Barcroft Images

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The title of David Wallace-Wells' recent essay in New York magazine is catchy, if not uncomfortable. "The Uninhabitable Earth: Famine, economic collapse, a sun that cooks us: What climate change could wreck - sooner than you think."

The article asks us to peer beyond scientific reticence into a doomsday future. The accounts of mass heat deaths in cities and praying for cornfields in the tundra is disturbing, but they're familiar. It's the same frame for how we talk about a much more immediate climate change disaster - US communities at risk to sea level rise today.

We've labeled Shishmaref, Alaska, a community that voted to relocate because of climate change impacts last August, a "tragedy of a village built on ice". We've marketed Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana, the first US town to receive federal funding to relocate, as climate change refugees watching their town slip into the sea. And we ask "Should the United States Save Tangier Island From Oblivion?" on the Chesapeake Bay island's future.

Each of these follows a recognizable storyline: a vanishing island, a culture slipping away and an ensemble of characters unsure of what their future holds. Each piece tells a cookie-cutter version of a vulnerable village in fear of rising tides and residents as victims on the frontline of climate change.

Shishmaref could stand in for Isle de Jean Charles, which could stand in for Tangier Island. In none of these stories does the community hold agency over their future, empowerment or resiliency.

These doomsday narratives are wrong, and they are dangerous.

Telling and sharing stories, from the scientific to the personal, is one the most important tools we have to survive climate change.

Stories help us to share facts, knowledge and experiences about the causes and effects of a warming world. But more than just educational tools, stories are how we make sense of the world we live in. The story you read in the newspaper or the documentary you watch on Netflix holds the immense ability to shape what we see and don't see. Those visibilities and invisibilities shift our perspectives. And it's those perceptions upon which we base our actions.

I'm going to repeat that, because it's really important. The narratives we read, hear and see informs how we understand climate change, and that understanding dictates whether we act or don't.

When we constantly see stories about communities in crisis as sea levels rise and extreme storms become more frequent, we come away with preconceived notions that all communities living on the frontline of climate change are victims in need of saving. On America's eroding edges, there is no hope - the future is presented as an ominously uncertain but seemingly inevitable defeat.

Feeling hopeless about a situation is cognitively associated with inaction and predicts decreased goal-directed behavior. That means when we present humanity as a hopeless victim of climate change, we are less likely to act because the ending seems inevitable. Climate change adaptation only works when we are hopeful for the future and believe that environmentally vulnerable communities have the agency to act.

Something simple and concrete that each of us can do? Tell different stories.

Instead of presenting narratives of helpless victims and an inevitable future of defeat, we should instead report on the climate change heroes who are doing everything they can to avoid that doomsday scenario. When people see strength in communities, we can

overcome limiting labels such as climate change victim and begin to dismantle our prejudices against people in need of resources.

We've already begun to change the narrative for cities and climate change mitigation. In the aftermath of Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris agreement, city leaders publicly committed to limit their greenhouse gas emissions. Their determination provided the foundation for an optimistic conversation about climate change solutions despite national inaction. Let's extend that climate of hope to communities along America's eroding edges by highlighting examples of local solutions.

Communities are championing the adaptation solutions that must complement the mitigation triumphs in cities. There are hundreds of stories of America's sea level rise warriors across red and blue states - I know because I've seen them firsthand.

Over the past year and a half, my research partner and I have traveled across the US and its territories to interview hundreds of Americans, from Alaska to Alabama to American Samoa. Funded by National Geographic and partnered with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, our aim was to find America's climate change story.

What we found was a story of hope.

In American Samoa, community advocate Andra Samoa is restoring the mangroves in her home village of Lenoe to stop shoreline erosion and bring back a healthy ecosystem. In Miami Beach, Florida, Elizabeth Wheaton is installing pumps and raising streets to protect neighborhoods and historic buildings intact. And in the Native village of Shaktoolik, Alaska, Mayor Eugene Asicksik has led the community in building a gravel berm to stave off rising tides. As nonpartisan efforts, community adaptations like these can bond us together as a country and spur national support for action on climate change.

I'm the first to admit that hope in the US is hard to come by these days. With the country now ready to pull out of the Paris agreement, it's hard not to feel like America has entered a four- or eight-year period of stagnation. But hope is a future-oriented emotion. And while it's predisposed to today's tragedies, hope is based on the belief that the future can be better than today. It's possible to be hopeful for tomorrow even when things seem hopeless now.

We are at a point today where every decision we make counts in deciding what America's climate change story will be - including the fundamental decision of how we tell climate change stories.

Let's start telling stories of hope and heroes.

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