

What I did on my summer vacation – another climatologist’s perspective

We should celebrate fossil fuels, not condemn them

David R. Legates

I recently read [an article](#) in which “hockey stick” creator and climatologist Michael Mann discussed his summer vacation. Reporting on his travels to Montana, Dr. Mann lamented the fact that glaciers in Glacier National Park are receding. He blamed this on human-caused climate change. He said he tried to get away from work but just couldn’t, because the “spectre of climate change stares you in the face as you tour the park.”

I likewise did my level best to get away from life, but was no more successful. You see, I’m not just a climatologist. I am also a human being, and am acutely aware of the life-long struggle for survival experienced by billions of destitute, desperate people on our planet – and of the innovative, determined human spirit that stares you in the face as you peruse the daily news and tour our nation’s museums.

Dr. Mann was viewing glaciers that have actually been receding since the end of the Little Ice Age, back around 1860. He got upset because he thinks (and wants us to believe) that they have been losing ice only since 1975 or so – and it’s our fault, because carbon dioxide emissions from our cars, factories, electricity generating plants, home heating units and other sources are causing “unprecedented” global warming.

I instead visited three museums that are within a one-hour drive from my home: the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania in Strasbourg, PA, the Air Mobility Command Museum at Dover Air Force Base in Dover, Delaware, and the Chesapeake-Delaware Canal Museum in Chesapeake City, Maryland.

What I saw underscored how far we Americans have come since the Civil War and Industrial Revolution, in large part because of fossil fuel-driven technology – and how far billions of less fortunate people worldwide still have to go, to achieve a standard of living, health and welfare close to what we enjoy. Unfortunately, and unforgivably, they are being held back by policies that elevate misplaced concern about hydrocarbon energy and “dangerous manmade climate change” above the needs of people.

At the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania you see the impacts the railway had on building this great nation. From simple steam engines that could carry just two people, to huge steam locomotives that connected our country’s two far-flung shores, to the diesel and electric locomotives that built the industrial backbone of this country, the ingenuity of the last 150-plus years sits quietly on display as an historical reminder of our legacy.

The Air Mobility Command Museum is a testimony not just to aviation, but to air cargo transportation. The amazing machines, and the intrepid men and women who flew them, helped us move equipment and supplies to support troops, provide assistance in areas ravaged by natural disasters or human catastrophes, and keep freedom alive in places like West Berlin during the 1948-49 airlift.

They also stand as marvelous monuments to human innovation – and a testament to our ability and determination to support freedom and democracy, and lend assistance when needed to the plight of those less fortunate, even when located in the far reaches of our planet.

Connecting two important waterways, the Chesapeake-Delaware Canal is truly a miracle of human entrepreneurship. Originally dug by hand, the fourteen-mile-long canal connects the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays, reducing the shipping distance from Baltimore to Philadelphia by nearly 300 miles.

Eventually, the canal was deepened and its locks removed, to allow goods to be shipped directly by ocean-going vessels without having to offload them to a turnpike, or later the railway. This greatly increased the region’s economic viability and encouraged development of the mid-Atlantic area.

But as I looked these monuments, I did so with sadness. This ingenuity was brought about by forward-looking men and women who used their energies to develop machines and enhance their efficiency, with the ultimate goal of helping humankind.

Today, however, there are those who see this effort as wrong and (dare I say it?) even evil. They want to restrict energy and its availability, and thereby limit our ingenuity, innovation and progress by draining

the very lifeblood that made these earlier developments possible. Without coal and oil, there would have been no railroads and no cargo transportation, either by air or by sea.

Democracy would likely have been but a distant memory in most of Europe and Southeast Asia – or maybe not even a memory at all. The United States would not have developed as it did, and it certainly would not be the world's leader in innovative thinking that it is today. It is quite likely that we would not be far removed from the conditions in which Africa currently finds itself.

These three museums only offer a small glimpse at the myriad of marvels produced by human ingenuity, and the role that hydrocarbon energy has played in them since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. The development of inexpensive energy led to phenomenal, previously unheard of increases in industrial output and worker efficiency, in wages and free time, in living standards and human health and welfare.

They also provided us with the weekend and vacation time, and the physical wherewithal, to experience the wonders of God's creation -- as well as the ability to attend to environmental stewardship.

It is all these opportunities that people in undeveloped and under-developed countries wish to emulate. But for that to happen, we must help keep the cost of energy low and shun policies and practices that make it expensive and unreliable. If we make energy so expensive that only the rich can afford it, the poor and the vulnerable will be denied access, and will be condemned to nasty, brutal and short lives marked by squalor, deprivation, starvation and disease.

I find it immoral to suggest that the abject poverty, disease and malnutrition that still afflict much of the world must be ignored, while we concern ourselves with "saving the planet from global warming."

Are national park glaciers – whose existence and demise are affected primarily by the same natural forces that repeatedly spawned and melted mile-high, continent-wide Pleistocene ice fields – more important than the more unfortunate inhabitants of our planet? Assuming, of course, that by addressing greenhouse gas emissions we can positively alter the planet's climate, or that we can know what climate is optimal.

It is ironic that it is our affluence – created by our technological innovations and use of hydrocarbons – which has allowed us to become environmentally conscious. When people are in dire need of food, clothing, shelter and other basic necessities of life, they cannot be concerned with environmental issues. To cite just one example of thousands, because the people of India and Bangladesh are so poor, the Ganges River serves as both their source of drinking water and their cesspool for untreated sewage. Their poverty prevents them from focusing on even the most basic environmental concerns.

Moreover, freedom and energy availability go hand-in-hand. Oppression thrives when subjects are kept poor and deprived of technological advancements. When people have the time and ability to travel and communicate, to be innovative, and to organize to produce a better way of life or fight a common enemy – freedom grows. Inexpensive energy is the key to ending both poverty and oppression.

More than two million people will visit Glacier National Park this year, to marvel at nature. I wonder how they would have gotten there – or whether they would have had the time to do so – if it were not for the transportation innovations that resulted from hydrocarbon fuels.

I would encourage them to visit these museums – or museums like them – to see what humans have built, and ponder what our future will likely be if backward-thinking policies cause their legacy to vanish. May they marvel at the wonders of nature, and perhaps lament the loss of glaciers. But may they also lament the loss of life caused by too little use of fossil fuels, not by too much of such life-enhancing fuels.

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