

OPINION

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Climate Change Hasn't Set the World on Fire

By Bjorn Lomborg

One of the most common tropes in our increasingly alarmist climate debate is that global warming has set the world on fire. But it hasn't. For more than two decades, satellites have recorded fires across the planet's surface. The data are unequivocal: Since the early 2000s, when 3% of the world's land caught fire, the area burned annually has trended downward.

In 2022, the last year for which there are complete data, the world hit a new record-low of 2.2% burned area. Yet you'll struggle to find that reported anywhere.

It turns out the percentage of the globe that burns each year has been declining since 2001.

Instead, the media acts as if the world is ablaze. In late 2021, the New York Times employed more than 40 staff on a project called "Postcards from a World on Fire," headed by a photorealistic animation of the world in flames. Its explicit goal was to convince readers of the climate crisis' immediacy through a series of stories of climate-change-related devastation across the world, including the 2019-20 wildfires in Australia.

This summer, the focus has been

on Canada's wildfires, the smoke from which covered large parts of the Northeastern U.S. Both the Canadian prime minister and the White House have blamed climate change.

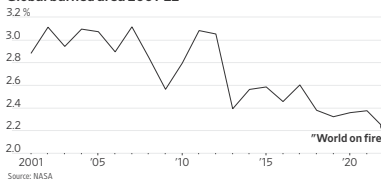
Yet the latest report by the United Nations' climate panel doesn't attribute the area burned globally by wildfires to climate change. Instead, it vaguely suggests the weather conditions that promote wildfires are becoming more common in some places. Still, the report finds that the change in these weather conditions won't be detectable above the natural noise even by the end of the century.

The Biden administration and the Times can paint a convincing picture of a fiery climate apocalypse because they selectively focus on the parts of the world that are on fire, not the much larger area where fires are less prevalent.

Take the Canadian wildfires this summer. While the complete data aren't in for 2023, global tracking up to July 29 by the Global Wildfire Information System shows that more land has burned in the Americas than usual. But much of the rest of the world has seen lower burning—Africa and especially Europe. Globally, the GWIS shows that burned area is slightly below the average between 2012 and 2022, a period that already saw some of the lowest rates of burned area.

The thick smoke from the Canadian fires that blanketed New York City and elsewhere was serious but only part of the story. Across the world, fewer acres burning each year has led to overall lower levels of

Global burned area 2001-22



smoke, which today likely prevents almost 100,000 infant deaths annually, according to a recent study by researchers at Stanford and Stockholm University.

Likewise, while Australia's wildfires in 2019-20 earned media headlines such as "Apocalypse Now" and "Australia Burns," the satellite data shows this was a selective narrative. The burning was extraordinary in two states but extraordinarily small in the rest of the country. Since the early 2000s, when 8% of Australia caught fire, the area of the country torched each year has declined. The 2019-20 fires scorched 4% of Australian land, and this year the burned area will likely be even less.

That didn't stop the media from cherry-picking. They ran with a study from the World Wildlife Fund that found the 2019-20 fires impacted—meaning took habitat or food from, subjected to heat stress, killed, or injured, among other things—three billion animals. But

this study looked mostly at the two states with the highest burning, not the rest of Australia. Nationally, wildfires likely killed or harmed six billion animals in 2019-20. That's near a record low; in the early 2000s fires harmed or killed 13 billion animals annually.

It's embarrassingly wrong to claim, as climate scientist Michael Mann did recently, that climate policy is the "only way" to reduce fires. Prescribed burning, improved zoning and enhanced land management are much faster, more effective and cheaper solutions for fires than climate policy. Environmental Protection Agency modeling showed that even with a drastic reduction in emissions it would take 50 to 80 years before we'd see a small impact in the area burned in the U.S.

In the case of American fires, most of the problem is bad land management. A century of fire suppression has left more fuel for stronger fires. Even so, last year U.S. fires

burned less than one-fifth of the average burn in the 1930s and likely only one-tenth of what caught fire in the early 20th century.

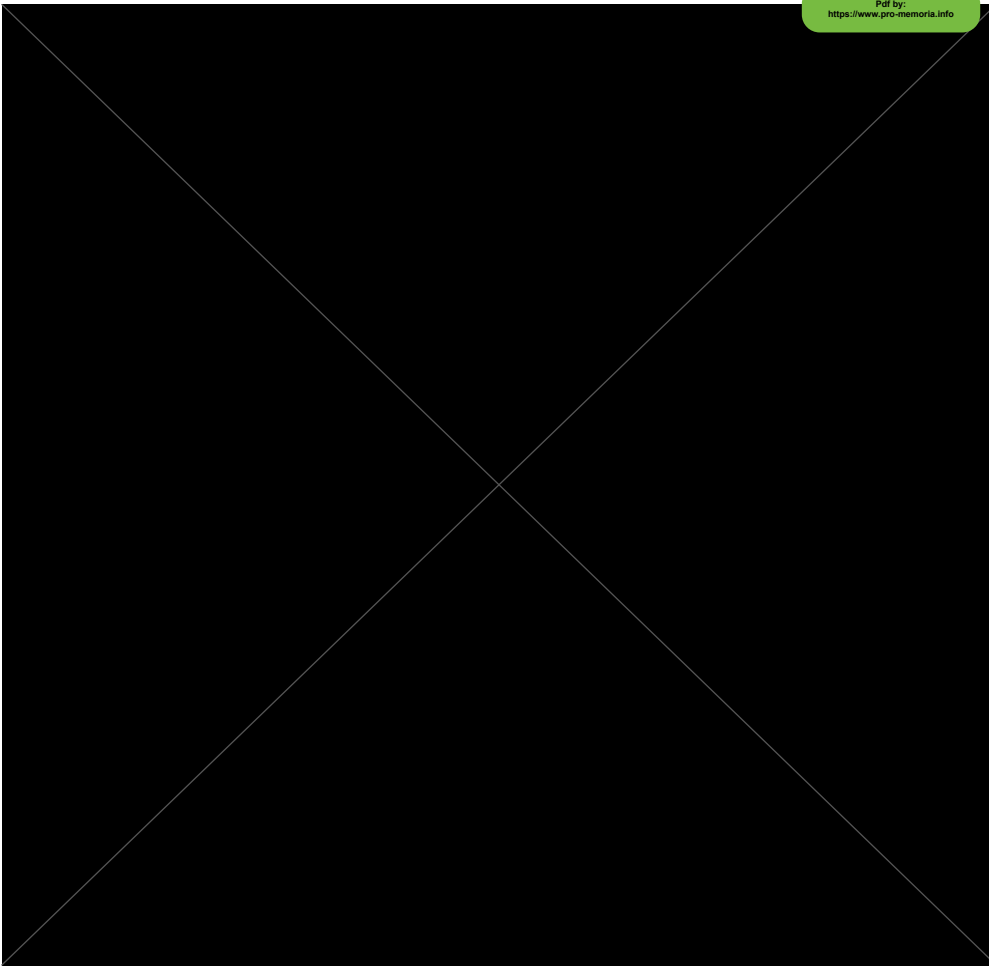
When reading headlines about fires, remember the other climate scare tactics that proved duds. Polar bears were once the poster cubs for climate action, yet are now estimated to be more populous than at any time in the past half-century. We were told climate change would produce more hurricanes, yet satellite data shows that the number of hurricanes globally since 1980 has trended slightly downward.

Global warming is a real challenge. Over the next century the costs associated will be the equivalent of one or two recessions. The common-sense response would be to recognize that both climate change and carbon-cutting policies incur costs, then negotiate a balance that puts the most effective measures first.

Surveys repeatedly show that most voters are unwilling to support the very expensive climate policies activists and green politicians have proposed. Overheated headlines about climate Armageddon are an attempt to scare us into supporting them anyway, at the cost of sensible discussion and debate.

Mr. Lomborg is president of the Copenhagen Consensus, a visiting fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and author of "False Alarm: How Climate Change Panic Costs Us Trillions, Hurts the Poor, and Fails to Fix the Planet."

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