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Humans have learned to live with rising tides



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Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

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The latest alarming news about climate change is that huge swaths of densely inhabited land will be underwater by 2050, with their cities “erased”. These reports — which appeared in The New York Times and many other media outlets — are based on a good research paper by scientists at Climate Central, but they get the story wrong.

This is part of a damaging pattern. Climate change is a man-made problem that we need to tackle, but many of the news stories about its purported effects are scaring us without justification and misleading us about how to act.

The paper, published last month in Nature Communications, shows that past estimates of the impact of rising sea levels were wrong because they relied on measurements of ground level that sometimes mistakenly included the heights of trees or houses.

In other words, vulnerability to sea-level rise has been underestimated. That’s important.

But some in the media have used this to create a dystopian vision of 2050. The New York Times published a terrifying map showing that southern Vietnam will “all but disappear” because it will be “underwater at high tide”. It told readers, “more than 20 million people in Vietnam, almost one-quarter of the population, live on land that will be inundated”. And it warned of similar effects elsewhere.

This news went viral. Bill McKibben, founder of the environmental organisation 350.org, tweeted that “climate change is shrinking (the) planet, in the scariest possible way”. Climate scientist Peter Kalmus said he was once concerned about being labelled “alarmist” but news like this made him embrace the term.

What the media neglected to mention is that the situation in southern Vietnam today is almost identical to the projected situation in 2050.

People in the Mekong River Delta literally live on the water. The area has been inhabited for generations because it is incredibly fertile, and over time people have protected land with dykes. In southern Vietnam’s An Giang province, almost all non-mountainous land is safeguarded in this way. In fact, it is “underwater” in the same way that much of Holland is: there, large areas of land, including Schiphol, one of the world’s busiest airports, are below sea level at high tide. In London, almost a million people live below the high-tide mark. But nobody in Holland, London or the Mekong River Delta needs scuba gear because humanity has adapted with infrastructure that provides flood protection.

The authors of the Climate Central study mention in their introduction that “coastal defences are not considered” in their approach. That’s fine for an academic paper — but it’s absolutely silly for some of the media to use the findings to support claims of “20 million people underwater”.

The study shows that 110 million people worldwide already are regularly “underwater”. Almost every one of them is well protected. The real story here is the triumph of ingenuity and adaptation.

By 2050, the authors say, a further 40 million people will be living below the high-tide mark, bringing the global total to 150 million. Other research clearly shows that we will be able to protect almost all of them. Remember that the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has estimated that the total impact of all negatives from global warming in the 2070s will be equivalent to society losing between 0.2 and 2 per cent of income — and by then, the UN’s standard scenarios suggest, we’ll be 300-500 per cent richer. So having an additional 40 million people living below the high-tide mark represents a slight increase of a challenge that we have shown ourselves fully capable of addressing, in a world that will be much wealthier and more resilient.

Climate change is a problem we need to tackle, and we should be particularly mindful of how it will hurt the poorest in society, but the bigger, unreported story is that today’s climate policies will do very little to resolve the “challenge” of more people living below the high-tide mark.

In southern Vietnam, the difference between implementing an extremely robust climate policy that limits the increase in average global temperature to less than 2C and embarking on the most outrageous fossil-fuel binge is almost nil, even at the end of the century. And globally, the most extreme climate policy pathway — costing thousands of trillions of dollars — will

reduce the number of people living “underwater” by only 18 per cent compared with a no-climate-policy scenario.

Even when we read stories from the world’s better known media outlets, we need to maintain perspective. Deaths from climate-related causes (floods, hurricanes, droughts, wildfire and extreme temperatures) have declined by 95 per cent over the past 100 years.

Furthermore, despite the constant barrage of claims that the global climate crisis is spiralling out of control, the cost of extreme weather as a proportion of GDP has been declining since 1990.

Alarming media stories that twist the facts about rising sea levels are dangerous because they scare people unnecessarily and push policymakers towards excessively expensive measures to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

The real solution is to lift the world’s poorest out of poverty and protect them with simple infrastructure.

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