

NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW:

Not if the Seas Rise, but When and How High

By [Jennifer Senior](#)

Once you've read an excellent book about climate change, which Jeff Goodell's "The Water Will Come" most certainly is, you can never unremember the facts. Elected officials may be busy arguing about whether global warming is real. But most scientists are having other arguments entirely — about whether danger is imminent or a few decades off; about whether our prospects are dire or merely grim.

"Sea-level rise is one of the central facts of our time, as real as gravity," Goodell writes. "It will reshape our world in ways most of us can only dimly imagine."

Goodell has little trouble imagining it. He opens "The Water Will Come" with a fictional hurricane whipping through Miami in 2037. It sweeps the Art Deco buildings of South Beach off their foundations, disgorges millions of gallons of raw sewage into Biscayne Bay and eats the last of the city's beaches. Thousands scramble for bottled water dropped by the National Guard. Zika and dengue fever start to bloom (so much moisture, so many mosquitoes). Out rush the retirees and glamour pussies; in rush the lawyers and slumlords. Within decades, the place is swallowed whole by the ocean. What was once a vibrant city is now a scuba-diving destination for intrepid historians and disaster tourists.

The whole scenario seems indecently feasible by the book's end.

After this year's calamitous flooding in [Houston](#) and [the Caribbean](#), "The Water Will Come" is depressingly well-timed, though I'm guessing all good books about this subject will be from now on. Political time now lags behind geological time: If we don't take dramatic steps to prepare for the rising seas, hundreds of millions could be displaced from their homes by the end of the century, and the infrastructure fringing the coast, valued in the trillions of dollars, could be lost.

Unfortunately, human beings are uniquely ill-suited to prepare for disasters they cannot sense or see. "We have evolved to defend ourselves from a guy with a knife or an animal with big teeth," Goodell writes, "but we are not wired to make decisions about barely perceptible threats that gradually accelerate over time."

So we stick our heads in the sand. Until the sand disappears, anyway.

To give you an idea of why many climate scientists are so nervous: Over the course of the earth's history, seas have risen drastically whenever ice sheets suddenly collapsed. And that's precisely what's happening now. Greenland is melting at a furious rate — by 2040, Goodell writes, we'll be able to windsurf at the North Pole — and so are the ice shelves of Antarctica.

Many of our climate reports, including the one that formed the basis of the [2015 Paris Agreement](#), hadn't predicted this. Their authors assumed that the most the sea could rise by 2100 was three feet, two inches. Now many scientists believe that estimate is too low. Some say the sea could rise as much as six feet; others say even more than that.

“For anyone living in Miami Beach or South Brooklyn or Boston’s Back Bay or any other low-lying coastal neighborhood,” Goodell writes, “the difference between three feet of sea level rise by 2100 and six feet is the difference between a wet but livable city and a submerged city.”

Goodell has been writing about climate change for many years. (His previous books include “[Big Coal](#)” and “[How to Cool the Planet](#).”) He’s the real deal, committed and making house calls. In “The Water Will Come,” partly built on stories [he’s written for Rolling Stone](#), he visits cities in peril around the globe: New York; Lagos, Nigeria; Norfolk, Va.; Miami; Venice; Rotterdam. He speaks to a great many politicians, including Barack Obama, eventually asking some version of, “Given what you know, aren’t you scared out of your wits?” (Obama’s response: “Yeah.”) At an art event, Goodell buttonholes an influential developer in Miami, Jorge Pérez, and asks several variations of the same question. Pérez insists he’s unworried. “Besides,” he adds, “by that time, I’ll be dead, so what does it matter?”

The full exchange is worth reading. It plays out like something from [a Carl Hiaasen novel](#). All that’s missing are the twin blondes in the hot tub.

Of all the American cities in this book, Miami seems least equipped to handle a rise in sea level, founded as it is on pleasure, real estate and the inalienable right to not pay state income taxes. (When a local geologist undertook a larger project to show just how much fecal matter was in Biscayne Bay, the mayor of Miami Beach went ballistic.) But every coastal city faces its own obstacles to adaptation, and the problems each one faces are different.

Naval Station Norfolk, the largest navy base in the world, may have as few as 20 good years left. Yet it's located in a climate-denial hot spot in Virginia, and it depends on more than a few climate-deniers in Congress for funding. "Many people in the military end up talking about climate in much the way eighth graders talk about sex — with code words," Goodell writes.

New York City may have more climate-change realists doing its bidding and spending its dollars. But the barrier the city plans to build to protect Wall Street — you've got to protect Wall Street, right? — could deflect water into poorer neighborhoods. (And let's not even discuss the fate of the subways.)

It is, perhaps, the world's poor who will suffer most. Goodell devotes a good deal of this book to contemplating their fate. Salty soil has already destroyed the rice crops of the Mekong Delta and Bangladesh. If the sea rises high enough, whole island nations could be washed away. The slum-dwellers of Lagos, Jakarta and other coastal cities in the developing world could be chased from their homes, many of which are already on stilts. The International Organization for Migration estimates there will be 200 million climate refugees by 2050.

Yet even countries with means can't get their citizens to focus on this problem. "The average American right now," [Obama tells Goodell](#), "even if they've gotten past climate denial, is still much more concerned about gas prices, getting back and forth from work, than they are about the climate changing."

Water simply isn't on their minds. They've got more pressing concerns to keep at bay.

