

When Summer Turns Deadly: A glimpse of tragedies to come.

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New York Times (1923-Current file); Aug 8, 1999; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. WK15

In America

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When Summer Turns Deadly

A glimpse of tragedies to come.

The death toll from the heat that scorched much of the country from mid-July to the early days of August has reached 271. The states that fared worst were Illinois, with 120 fatalities, and Missouri, with 61.

Get used to it. This summer's intense heat is not, by itself, evidence that global warming is upon us. But it is part of an increasingly convincing trend, and it's a good example of the hazards we'll face if, as expected, that trend continues.

In an interview last week, Dr. Michael Oppenheimer, chief scientist of the Environmental Defense Fund, said the average person in a place like the New York metropolitan area would probably experience the change over the coming decades in the following fashion: "It's getting hot, it's getting humid, it's getting horrible, and it's happening more and more often."

He added: "This is very important because there are direct public health impacts from too much heat. Heat kills. It's that simple."

Dr. Laurence Kalkstein of the Center for Climatic Research at the Uni-

versity of Delaware is an expert on the relationship between extreme temperatures and mortality. In a paper he co-authored with J. Scott Greene of the University of Oklahoma, he wrote:

"Using models that estimate climate change for the years 2020 and 2050, it is estimated that summer mortality will increase dramatically and winter mortality will decrease slightly, even if people acclimatize to the increased warmth. Thus, a sizable net increase in weather-related mortality is estimated if the climate warms as the models predict."

Dr. Kalkstein noted in an interview that it is not just high temperatures but heat associated with particular types of oppressive air masses that is most dangerous to humans. And the occurrences of those high-risk air masses are expected to increase substantially over the next several decades.

For New Yorkers it will ultimately seem as if the city, weather-wise, had slipped far below the Mason-Dixon line. A report in June from the Environmental Defense Fund (prepared in

York it's a little higher. In Washington it's a little higher yet."

We are speeding toward increasingly tragic long-term consequences. The smart thing to do would be to view the toll from this summer's heat wave as a warning, a sign that closer attention must be paid and strategies and solutions developed.

As bad as the official death toll was, Dr. Kalkstein believes the real toll this summer was probably much higher. "The death rates could be 50 to 60 percent higher from all heat-related causes," he said. "Not just heat stroke and heat exhaustion, but from heart attacks and respiratory distress and so on. What we do to measure heat-related death is look at the long-term baseline, the average. And during these heat waves, when there are bad air masses in, we look at the number of deaths above that particular baseline. And we attribute all of those deaths to the heat."

During the interview, Dr. Kalkstein mentioned that while studying heat-related deaths in Rome he came upon the surprising finding that in severe

heat waves women apparently were dying at significantly higher rates than men.

He said: "On the worst 1 percent of days, women in Rome die at a rate that is 50 percent higher in some cases than men do. We've never seen this result before."

He said he and his colleagues plan to re-check their data, which have not yet been published, and also will try to determine if similar patterns exist in the U.S. □