Opinion | Wildfires Are Unfightable Now

John Vaillant

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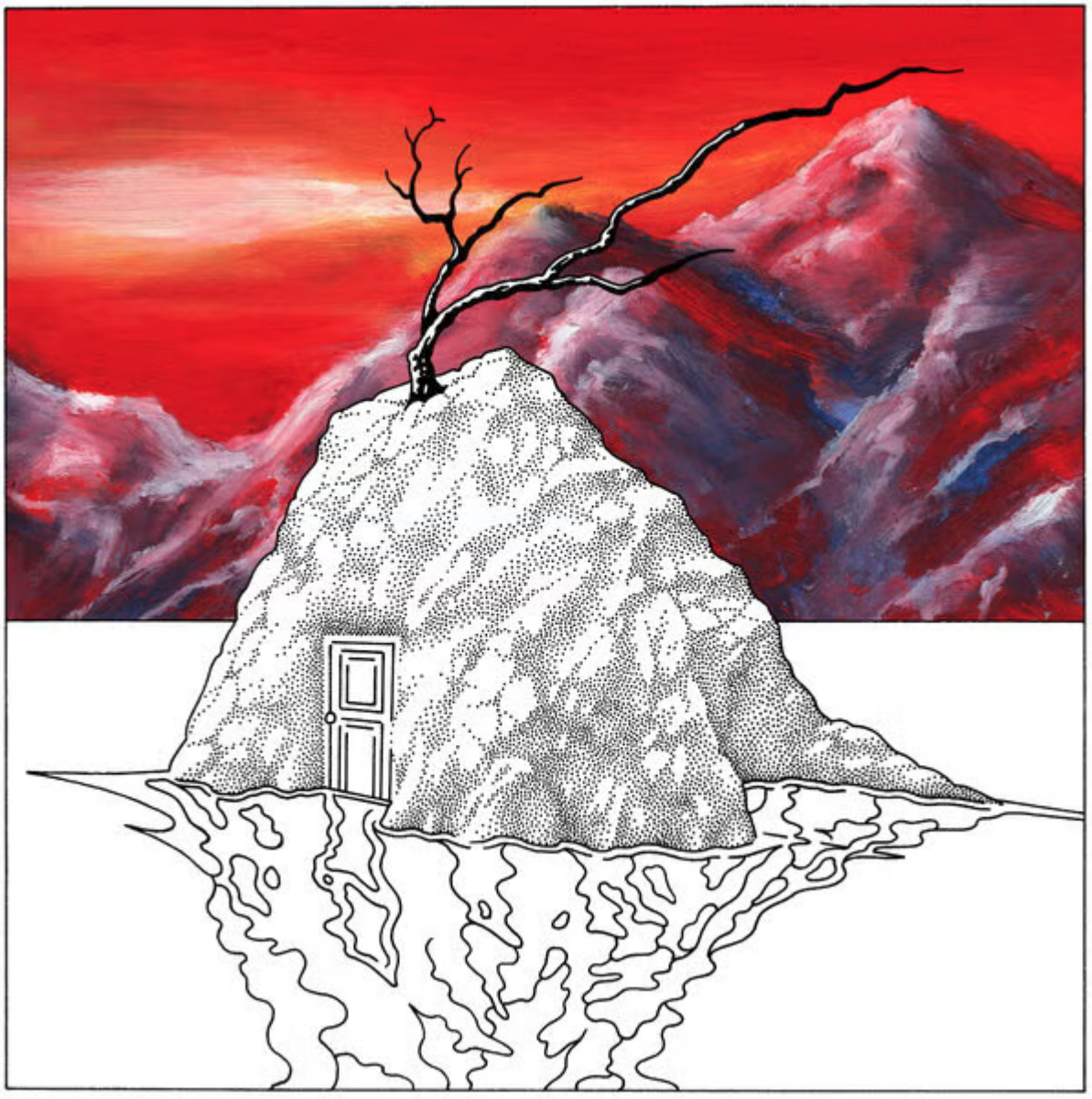
Guest Essay

This Is the Future Scientists Warned About

Oct. 12, 2026



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By John Vaillant

Mr. Vaillant is the author of “Fire Weather: A True Story from a Hotter World.”

As out-of-control wildfires burned hundreds of homes in southern British Columbia this August, Cliff Chapman, director of operations for the province’s wildfire service, issued a sobering statement. “I cannot stress enough that the conditions we are facing right now are conditions that we have never seen before,” he told reporters.

Mr. Chapman, who has been fighting wildfires for over 20 years, could have made the same statement from Washington State, Croatia or many other places where similarly explosive wildfires have scorched neighborhoods and forced mass evacuations. These fast-moving, virtually irrepressible events are not the seasonal burns of decades past; they are the hazard lights of a heating climate, and they are flashing furiously. Rural and urban, East and West, we are entering a new era of civilizational risk and retreat.

In past years, the U.S. Forest Service’s red-flag warning was sufficient to convey extreme fire risk, but officials this year found it inadequate. In Washington State, they appended a designation typically reserved for life-threatening tornadoes: particularly dangerous situation.

This wasn’t adjective inflation — it was a sincere effort to articulate the extraordinary fire conditions that burned nearly 1,000 structures in and around Spokane in August, making it the most destructive wildfire in the state’s history. As of Oct. 5, more than 9 million acres have burned across the United States, the largest area set aflame by this date in more than a decade, and much of the country is still primed to burn. Oregon has declared 2026 the worst fire season in state history. Utah, Ontario, France, Spain, Britain and Belgium have either experienced their worst or are on track to do so.

But what’s really striking this year is how many civilians and firefighters across the hemisphere have described lethal combinations of velocity and ferocity. Hundred-meter flames are not uncommon anymore, nor are cyclonic winds with towering fire whirls, corkscrewing skyward like molten ten-story unicorn’s horns. Both phenomena can be precursors for pyrocumulonimbus “fire clouds” — enormous, combustive weather systems that affect entire geographic regions.

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By growing so big that it becomes a weather system unto itself and so tall that it gyres like a hurricane, effectively controlling the entire air column of a region’s lower atmosphere, the pyroCb, as it’s known, creates optimal conditions for self-perpetuation. Lightning strikes can start new fires 20 or 30 miles beyond the fire’s epicenter, and hurricane-force winds can fan flames to sky-scraping heights while driving embers far beyond any fire break, retardant line or back burn. Simply put, nothing can stop one of these firestorms except a change in the weather or a lack of fuel.

Since the early 2000s, when atmospheric carbon dioxide hit 370 parts per million (about 30 percent higher than preindustrial levels), pyroCbs have grown increasingly common across Australia and the North American West. During Canada’s record-setting fire season of 2023, 142 pyroCb events were logged across

the country. The firestorms have appeared farther eastward ever since. This summer, France experienced its first pyroCb, and atmospheric carbon dioxide maintained a year-round level above 425 parts per million (more than 50 percent higher than preindustrial levels) for the first time in modern recorded history.

There is a well-known threshold in firefighting beyond which a wildfire becomes unfightable by traditional means: 10,000 kilowatts of energy per meter along a wildfire's leading edge indicates an out-of-control fire too dangerous for firefighters to approach and too hot for water bomber drops to be effective. Fires that have burned from the Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean to the Black Sea are now crossing that threshold routinely — and resoundingly. What the pyroCb adds to this already untenable scenario is self-sustaining momentum, like a rogue computer that has hijacked its power source.

When you place this summer's fire events alongside persistent drought conditions that have brought water levels to historic lows from western Canada to Siberia, it becomes clearer that severe conditions are playing out across an entire hemisphere. Some might see these as random events. I see a superheated Earth. Add the Asian heat waves that broke 122 degrees Fahrenheit in Xinjiang, China, and "boiled" potatoes in the ground in Yanggu County, South Korea, and there's no getting around the fact that we — as a species and as a planet — are now living in the future that climate scientists have been warning us about for more than half a century.

With these new conditions comes a physical retreat of the human footprint and an aspirational contraction of what humans can do and where we can do it. The contraction is underway not just in terms of coastlines, forests and glacial valleys becoming unsafe or untenable to inhabit, but in terms of previously hospitable spaces becoming uncomfortably hot and smoky. Outdoor activities such as hiking, camping and patio dining have in many places been severely constrained.

These impacts are accompanied by a parallel contraction of civic resources: Investment and creative capital previously dedicated to development, expansion and improvement must now be redirected toward repair, recovery and remediation. According to Spokane's mayor, Lisa Brown, her city's recovery from August's fires will take years. Replacing the 16,000 buildings lost in the 2025 Los Angeles fires will most likely take a decade, and the specter of uninsurability looms over the country. Meanwhile, billions of dollars are disappearing from the economy in the form of burned houses and forests, lost wages, lost waterfronts, closed businesses, degraded health and the millions of potential customers who simply decide to stay home because of heat and smoke. Consider, too, how much more we now spend on air conditioning and air filtration.

The rawest and most dramatic manifestation of civilizational retreat is mass evacuation during catastrophic fire, and this summer saw some of the biggest ever: Tens of thousands of Americans and Canadians were forced to flee wildfires from British Columbia to Texas. In southern Europe, hundreds of thousands of French and Spanish citizens were evacuated in one of the region's largest dislocations since World War II, along with many thousands more in neighboring countries. Nepal's devastating glacier collapse is another ominous indicator: There are dozens of similarly vulnerable communities not just in the Himalayas but also in the Andes, the Alps and the Rocky Mountains.

Most, but not all, of these evacuees will return home, but it will be to a new uncertainty and instability.

Many are wondering: Can I restore my lost business, crops, forest lands? If my home survived, can I insure it? What about next summer? Events of this magnitude mark survivors for life, the same way tornadoes and mass shootings do.

Since the 2023 publication of my book “Fire Weather,” about the 2016 Fort McMurray Fire in Canada, I have been on the road continually — five continents so far — not because of my hosts’ particular interest in Canada but because of their concerns about wildfires and the clear and present danger they now pose all over the world. The Fort McMurray fire, then an outlier event, is now repeating itself virtually every year in and around much larger, more centrally located cities. The past decade has been transformative, and over the past three years I’ve witnessed an evolving awareness and, with it, anxiety: Now, almost everyone I meet has seen the orange sky and the red sun at noon, has felt the rasp of smoke in their throat.

Nothing in our past experience has prepared us for impacts at once so varied, broad and seemingly random and yet so existential and life-threatening. Looming over this new precarity is the El Niño whose energetic discharge from the overheated Pacific Ocean is expected to be the most severe event of its kind in a millennium. In order to chart its anticipated severity, expressed regionally by elevated heat, drought, rainfall and sea levels, El Niño specialists are extending the y axis on their graphs.

Two generations ago, the economist, ambassador and author John Kenneth Galbraith observed, “People of privilege will always risk their complete destruction rather than surrender any material part of their advantage.” This is the quandary we find ourselves in: It is clear that the fossil-fuel-dependent status quo is degrading global ecosystems and our quality of life in real time, but we are reluctant to take the decisive and comprehensive steps to decouple our economy and lifestyle not only from this outmoded energy but also from those who profit most from our continued dependence on it.

There was a time in the recent past — in the 1980s and 1990s — when we could have been forgiven for not being sure how to respond to the future disruptions of climate breakdown. But now we know. In our own hearts and minds, there may yet be room and reason for compassion and forgiveness, but nature will show us no such sympathy.

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