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OPINIONBEST OF THE WEB

Hurricane Ian and Climate

Media outlets should try simply reporting what happened.

James Freeman [Follow](#)

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After the awful destruction of Hurricane Ian, Florida neighbors are doing what they do—helping each other stay dry and calm and fed and hydrated. But further north, even before landfall the storm presented an opportunity to promote political narratives. Doesn't anyone just trust the science anymore?

In the Washington Examiner Brad Polumbo describes “a concentrated effort to exploit the natural disaster to push a Green-New-Deal-esque climate change agenda. The most prominent example of this blatant politicization is a now-viral interview in which CNN host Don Lemon repeatedly attempts to get an expert to blame Hurricane Ian on climate change.”

Of course Mr. Lemon is not alone. Media outlets including the Washington Post and National Public Radio are out with stories tying this week's tragic natural disaster to climate change.

Posties Scott Dance and Kasha Patel report:

As Hurricane Ian barreled toward Florida this week, it did what six other storms did over the past six years as they approached the United States: It

intensified, quickly.

A few factors help account for the shift, including the warming waters — fueled by climate change — that give hurricanes more energy to release through crushing winds and pounding waves. Climate scientists suspect the slow movement of storms like Ian also stems from global warming, giving them a greater opportunity to strengthen and destroy as long as day-to-day conditions remain ripe.

Since 2017, an unprecedented number of storms rated Category 4 or stronger have lashed the U.S. shoreline: Harvey, Irma, Maria, Michael, Laura, Ida and now Ian. They all qualify as “rapid intensification events,” when a storm’s wind speeds increase by at least 35 mph within 24 hours.

Are man-made emissions creating more hurricanes like Ian? In May of this year, the federal government’s Climate.gov website published an article with the highly relevant title, “Can we detect a change in Atlantic hurricanes today due to human-caused climate change?”

Authors Chris Landsea, head of the tropical analysis and forecast branch at the federal National Hurricane Center in Miami, and Tom Knutson, senior scientist at the government’s Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory in Princeton, N.J., concluded:

Atlantic hurricanes display distinct busy and quiet periods: Busy hurricane decades occurred in the late 19th century, mid-20th century, and from the mid-1990s onward, but quieter decades in the early 20th century and in the 1970s to early-1990s.

These multi-decadal variations in Atlantic tropical storms and hurricanes have been linked to a phenomenon called the Atlantic Multidecadal Variability, which may be primarily natural internal variability or aerosol-driven.

A detectable greenhouse gas-induced influence on observed Atlantic tropical storm and hurricane behavior to date is difficult to identify because of the 50-80 year variability in hurricane activity.

The bottom-line answer to the question in the title is: No, we cannot confidently detect a trend today in observed Atlantic hurricane activity due to man-made (greenhouse gas-driven) climate change. Some human influence may be present though still below the threshold for confident detection.

As readers can imagine, trying to put such events in appropriate perspective amid a media hysteria can be a challenging task. Climate-obsessed reporters often cast weather events as unprecedented and record-breaking. Last year Mr. Landsea and National Hurricane Center colleague Eric Blake wrote a blog post with the following headline:

Was 2020 a Record-Breaking Hurricane Season? Yes, But. . .

The authors noted:

The 30 named storms in 2020 sets a record going back to the 1870s when the U.S. Signal Service (a predecessor to the National Weather Service) began tracking tropical storms and hurricanes. The only year that comes close is 2005 with 28 named storms. It's also apparent that a very large increase has occurred in the number of observed named storms from an average of 7 to 10 a year in the late 1800s to an average of 15 to 18 a year in the last decade or so – a doubling in the observed numbers over a century!

They also added some additional useful context:

However, the number of named storms is only one measure of the overall measure of a season's activity. And indeed, for the 2020 season, other measures of Atlantic tropical storm and hurricane activity were not record breaking. For example, the number of hurricanes (14) was well above average, but fell short of the previous record of 15 hurricanes that occurred in 2005.

For overall monitoring of tropical storm and hurricane activity, tropical meteorologists prefer a metric that combines how strong the peak winds reached in a tropical cyclone, and how long they lasted – called Accumulated Cyclone Energy or ACE. By this measure, 2020 was extremely busy, but not even close to record breaking. In fact, with a total ACE of 180 units, 2020 was only the 13th busiest season on record since 1878 with seasons like 1893, 1933,

1950, and 2005 substantially more active than 2020. One can also see that while there is a long-term increase in recorded ACE since the late 1800s, it's quite a bit less dramatic than the increase seen with named storms. There also is a pronounced busier/quieter multi-decadal (40- to 60-year) cycle with active conditions in the 1870s to 1890s, late 1920s to 1960s, and again from the mid-1990s onward. Conversely, quiet conditions occurred in the 1900s to early 1920s and 1970s to early 1990s.

Perhaps media outlets should focus on simply reporting *what* happened, rather than promoting pet theories about *why* things happen.

Mr. Freeman will host "WSJ at Large" Friday at 7:30 p.m. EDT on the Fox Business Network. The program repeats at 9:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. EDT on Saturday and Sunday.

James Freeman is the co-author of "The Cost: Trump, China and American Revival."

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