

# The Register-Guard

## Guest View: The reckoning of our mistakes is upon us

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The bad news repeats relentlessly: continental heatstroke, drought, hurricanes and fires of hell in southern Oregon and West-wide. Not to mention floods next winter and sea-level overtaking not just Miami but also undermining Highway 101 close to home.

But here's what the world is telling us: We've been doing it all wrong. And we've known better for a long time.

About the water shortage that threatens the Southwest because the Colorado River has shrunk to a trickle, John Wesley Powell — Civil War veteran turned prophet of dams, farms and their failure in arid states — angrily warned Congress, "There is not sufficient water to irrigate all the lands. ... I tell you, gentlemen, you are piling up a heritage of conflict." But pile it up we did, spending billions to dam and spread water across sagebrush plains and move farmers from the East.

In 1930, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. beseeched Los Angeles officials to set aside for nature what has become known as the "fire coast" of Southern California. Just stay away, he warned, because it's going to burn again, as it has. Then prophetic geographer Gilbert White warned in 1942 to not further develop cities, towns and homes on lowlands bound to flood, but we did it anyway, making high-water disasters inevitable.

American society and political forces could not say "no" to any of this.

Think of that society as a young child. We don't want limits or discipline. We had no business thinking we could grow hot Phoenix into the nation's sixth-largest city without adequate water. Or that we could build condos within the lap of high tide

and not get wet or have the roof blow off during a hurricane. Or that we could scatter millions of homes across tinderbox- hinterlands of the West and not expect them to burn.

A lesson lies hidden here in the smoke and refuse, illustrating a fundamental fact and irony of our time. We've regarded the laws of nature as optional when in fact they are absolute. Meanwhile we regard our own habits, customs and laws as immutable when in fact we can change them whenever we collectively decide to do so. In our minds we've perfectly reversed the way the world actually works.

Now the fires, floods and heat show how wrong we've been.

Each crisis tells us that the error of depending on fossil fuels and thereby heating the planet needs to be corrected. But fixing that will take a while, and in the meantime the consequences are giving us no choice but to start down paths of reform that we should have taken long ago. In fact, we can live without farms where there had been only cacti, without investments to the edge of the coastal surge and without homes on mountainsides that explode in flames given low-humidity, wind and lightening. The result of reforms like these will yield not only economic and public-safety improvements but also a restored desert, a life- filled edge of beach and wetlands along our seacoasts and a refuge of re-wilded mountains where nature can thrive better than can our spread of suburbs and rural outposts.

It's time to pivot to what we should have done long ago, with or without earth's limits pushing us in a crisis of climate. Looking beyond today's suffering, it can be a path of hope. The needed changes take us to a new world and, unlike the one we're now in, the new one will be possible.

The apocalypse is telling us that we've made a lot of mistakes and that now, finally, it's time to get it right.

*Tim Palmer is the author of the upcoming *Seek Higher Ground: The Crisis of Flooding and What We Must Do About It*, and several books about Oregon. See his work at [www.timpalmer.org](http://www.timpalmer.org).*

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