The increase in wildfires is linked via climate change to social inequity

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When the crown jewel of industrial civilization—the automobile—was introduced in London, it was met with resistance. Wouldn't burning fossil fuels pollute the air? "Yes, it would," admitted its proponents, "but

think of how much cleaner the streets would be for lack of horse manure." As one technology has supplanted another, so has one pollution changed forms. Horse manure, for all its faults, is a great fertilizer. Carbon dioxide, the main byproduct of fossil fuel combustion, has no such virtue: Unless processed in ways that are currently very costly, it is a long-lived greenhouse gas, warming the planet for centuries on end.

This fact was surmised in 1896 (two years after the Great Horse Manure Crisis of 1894) by Svante Arrhenius, a Swedish scientist who saw little harm in a few degrees of warming. Sweden is cold, most of the time.

Over a century of scientific progress has shown how right he was about the human-made greenhouse effect, and how wrong he was to regard it as benign.

Anthropogenic global warming has nefarious consequences on many aspects of our environment, including sea-level rise, heat waves, droughts, invasive species migrations, and yes, wildfires. These days, few extreme weather events happen without my phone ringing and journalists asking, "Is this due to global warming?" (another way of asking, "Could we have prevented this?"). The answer is more complex than people want to hear: No single event can ever be directly tied to climate change, though we can now compute the odds of this event happening in today's climate versus it happening in a hypothetical climate unaffected by our carbon emissions. The result is, quite often, that such disasters were made more likely—sometimes vastly so—by the burning of fossil fuels that currently power our civilization.

Any fire scientist will tell you that there are multiple factors making California wildfires—like the Woolsey fire that ravaged Malibu last year—worse. Climate change, and its tendency to suck moisture from the ground, is a major one. Increased building at the wildland-urban interface, and the increased opportunities it affords for sparks to spread

to vegetation, is another. Equally consequential is our related forest management practice of not letting even minor forest burns take their course, which is how natural California ecosystems had self-regulated for thousands of years. This has resulted in an accumulation of burnable material that fuels blazes of unprecedented scale. Finally, there is our rising population, and its social problems: Utility company accidents are a leading cause of human-started blazes, and most Angelenos remember that the 2017 Skirball fire, which brought scenes reminiscent of Mordor, was started by an illegal cooking fire at a homeless encampment in a brush area near the Sepulveda Pass.

California wildfires are the visible manifestations of our society's difficulty in grappling with the same fundamental issue: inequity. Carbon is disproportionately emitted by the super-rich and their carbon-intensive lifestyles. Globally, it is poor countries that bear the brunt of this burden. Carbon justice is social justice, and creating a more just world will require nothing less of us than reinventing what it means to create and share energy and wealth, in ways that respect the planet and the creatures that live on it. Until we do, wildfires will keep asking the same question of us: "Is there a more pressing issue?"

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