



Global warming to blame for warm winter?

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As the snow finally settles in the Midwest, it seems the long-awaited winter season — after a series of false starts — is finally upon us.

As pleasant as a 65 degrees Fahrenheit Christmas can be, one can't help but consider the strangeness of these weather anomalies and, in comparison, how eerily inappropriate the flurry of seasonal advertisements of coke-drinking polar bears and SUVs smoothly veering around snowy hillsides really are when, outside one's own window, clear, sunny skies lay background to confused flocks of geese flapping over half-frozen, half-thawing ponds — depending on your personal predilection for climate optimism.

Many have been quick to half-jokingly thank or decry global warming for this strange delay in an otherwise predictable seasonal transition. According to most mainstream scientists, however, to attribute a direct causal relationship between global warming and this unseasonably warm holiday season would not be altogether accurate. In addition to oscillating wind patterns trapping cold air in the Arctic, this year's particularly strong climate event known as El Niño raised ocean temperatures — and subsequently temperatures throughout North America — to record highs.

The question then becomes: Is global warming the cause of El Niño's big showing this year? A 2014 study by Cai et al. does indicate a connection between greenhouse gases and particularly extreme El Niño events; however, like many climate related questions, a direct answer in this instance proves difficult to pinpoint.

What can be said with confidence concerning global warming, however, is that the planet has seen significant temperature increases over approximately the last century. In other words: The planet is, indeed, heating up at a significant rate.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) — a United Nations-based organization comprising thousands of leading climate scientists from around the world — has stated unequivocally that this is the case and, furthermore, that heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions

caused by human activity have significantly contributed to this particular warming period, though the latter point is generally considered a politically contentious one.

Despite opposition from well-organized and well-funded interests groups such as Americans for Prosperity and the Cato Institute, who are bent on debunking the notion of mankind's contribution to climate change, the vast consensus among climate scientists affiliated with organizations like the IPCC maintain the certainty of our at least partial responsibility, citing, among many other studies, the parallel increases in global greenhouse gas emissions and the rate of global temperature increase.

The inherent complexity of our planet's weather systems, and the perhaps equally complex political climate, make determining answers to questions like the one posed in the title of this article difficult. It does seem, however, that the measurable increase in ocean acidity, year after year of record-breaking high global temperatures as well as rapidly fluctuating levels of polar ice mass — among many other significant and notably modern changes in our ecosystem — indicate a momentous transitional climate period that we are currently living through.

It remains highly probable that unseasonable weather patterns, despite not being directly caused by global warming, will continue to be indirectly affected by the overall change in our planetary ecosystem as global temperatures continue to rise.

In light of this, it is important to remember that, although any one question concerning climate activity today is unlikely to yield a single, specifically attributable cause, it is an easy and potentially catastrophic mistake to miss the forest for the trees — which, to further complicate the matter, are also disappearing at alarming rates in many parts of the world. To put it simply: quibbling over specific causes of individual weather events, however mild or catastrophic, is to miss an opportunity to recognize the big picture of an ailing planet whose fever must be remedied for the sake of everything we now take for granted.

I am the last person you'll find gleefully scraping layers of ice from my windshield in the dead of a traditional Midwestern winter, but I am also of the belief that the cautionary sci-fi films featuring rabid armies of bandits scouring dry, barren landscapes for dwindling resources while dreaming tales of an ancient green paradise, belong strictly on celluloid and not in the reality of the lives of our grandchildren so long as we still have a say in the matter, which I certainly believe we do.