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## An Ethical Examination of How The US Press Has Covered Links Between Hurricane Sandy and Climate Change

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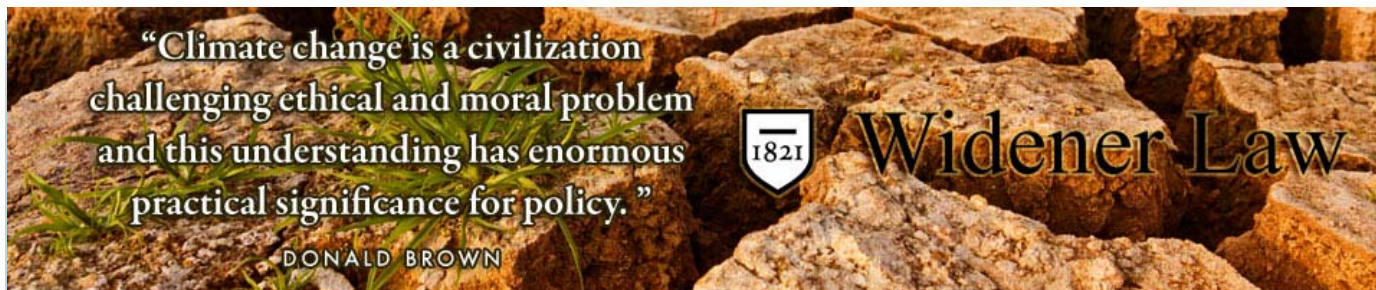
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# Ethics and Climate

Donald Brown



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## An Ethical Examination of How The US Press Has Covered Links Between Hurricane Sandy and Climate Change



US President Obama and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie Inspect Damages from Hurricane Sandy., October 31, 2012

### I-Introduction

In this paper we examine through an ethical lens how the controversy about links between Hurricane Sandy and climate change have been covered by the US media. In the last two weeks the mainstream media has awoken, at least temporarily, from a slumber about climate change because of the enormous damages from Sandy and their potential links to human-induced warming. Although this renewed attention to climate change should be welcomed, in the [last entry](#) on EthicsandClimate.org we identified several crucial missing features of climate change in the renewed press coverage of climate change that citizens need to know to understand why climate change is such a civilization challenging threat. These missing features include: (a) the nature of the strong scientific consensus about climate change, (b) the magnitude and urgency of the emissions reductions necessary to prevent dangerous climate change, (c) the barrier that the United States has been to finding a global solution for over 20 years, (d) the nature of the climate change disinformation campaign, and (e) the significance for policy of the fact that climate change is a civilization challenging ethical problem.

Ethicsandclimate.org has frequently explained the practical significance for policy of the fact that climate change is a civilization challenging ethical problem. We now look at the recent press coverage of the links between hurricane damage and climate change to identify how recognition of the ethical dimensions of climate change would affect the way the press covers links between hurricane damage and

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[climate change and markets \(8\)](#)

[climate change commercials \(1\)](#)

[climate change disinformation \(12\)](#)

[climate change ethics \(33\)](#)

[climate change governance \(10\)](#)

[climate change impacts \(4\)](#)

[climate change policy-making \(28\)](#)

[climate change video \(3\)](#)

[climate ethics \(13\)](#)

[Contraction and Convergence \(2\)](#)

[Copenhagen \(7\)](#)

[crime against humanity \(7\)](#)

[disinformation campaign \(see also climate change disinformation\) \(4\)](#)

[Distributive and International Justice \(17\)](#)

[Durban \(2\)](#)

[Duty to acknowledge risk \(8\)](#)

climate change.

**II. Scientifically Understood Links Between Hurricane Sandy and Climate Change**

Hurricane Sandy has produced a flurry of media activity on the possible links between climate change and the damage from Sandy in the Northeastern United States. For a sampling of various ways the US media has discussed possible ways of understanding this connection see the blog *Residence on Earth: Articles about Hurricane Sandy and Climate Change*.

Much of the press coverage makes the claim that there are links between Hurricane Sandy and climate change by pointing to the elevated ocean temperatures that have been caused by human-induced climate change, increased wind speed that is fueled by elevated ocean water temperatures, greater amounts of water that is transported into the atmosphere from the oceans in a warming world and dumped as rain during the storms, and rising sea levels that make storm surges worse.

Those opposing action on climate change often deny that one can link Hurricane Sandy to climate change.

A website whose mission is to oppose action on climate change, ClimateDepot, lists the following statements, among many others, of those who claim that there is no link between Hurricane Sandy and climate change:

- Meteorologist Hoerling of NOAA: ‘The immediate cause is most likely little more than the coincidental alignment of a tropical storm with an extratropical storm. Both frequent W. Atlantic in Oct....nothing unusual with that’
- Prof. Pielke Jr.: ‘We’ve done long-term trends with respect to hurricane damage in the United States, and it’s very safe to say that regardless of how [Sandy] plays out, there’s a century-long time series with no trend in it — and that’s in damage, the number of landfalls, or the intensity of storms at landfall. So, if you are looking for signals of long-term climate change, focusing in on any one storm is the wrong way to go about it to begin with’
- Houston Chronicle’s Science guy Eric Berger: ‘...it is a big stretch to go from there to blaming Sandy on climate change. It’s a stretch that is just not supported by science at this time’

([Climatedepot 2012](#))

The mainstream scientific view on climate change, a view as we have previously explained in [Ethicsandclimate.org](#) that is supported by every Academy of Science in the world, almost all scientific organizations whose members have expertise relevant to climate science, and over 97% of scientists that do peer-review climate change science, holds that human-induced climate change is making the world warmer and sea level rise in predictable and measurable amounts. The mainstream view also holds that a warmer world will create more intense storms for a variety of reasons including that there will be more water vapor in the atmosphere in a warming world. There is now very strong evidence that the frequency of extreme weather events is increasing even if the record is not yet clear as to whether hurricanes are increasing in frequency.

Scientists know with high levels of certainty that climate change has increased Earth’s temperature, and that this warming has fueled more heat waves, more intense precipitation, more intense droughts, and more wildfires.

It is also true that scientists dont know for sure that climate change will make hurricanes more frequent but if hurricanes are formed they will increase damages because:

- Economics and Climate Change (21)
- Economics and Cost (23)
- ethical questions raised by climate change (25)
- ethics and energy policy (11)
- ethics and scientific uncertainty, Add category (11)
- ethics of climate change (31)
- General Climate Ethics (75)
- global warming ethics (39)
- Higher education and climate change ethics (3)
- Human Rights-Universal Rights (6)
- hurricanes and climate change (1)
- Independent Responsibility to Act (11)
- liability for climate change (1)
- magnitude of needed greenhouse emissions reductions (5)
- Market Theory (1)
- Media and climate change (5)
- Media Coverage of Climate Change (13)
- Mitigation (4)
- Obama and climate change (3)
- Practical need to see climate change ethical issues Add category (6)
- Presiden Obama and climate change (4)
- press and climate change (8)
- Procedural Justice and Fair Process (8)
- propaganda and climate change (2)
- Qatar climate negotiations (2)
- reasonable skepticism (17)
- renewable energy ethics (3)
- Romney and climate (1)
- scientific disinformation (20)
- Scientific Uncertainty and Risk (34)
- sustainability ethics (4)
- sustainability law (1)
- temperature limits (1)
- tornadoes (1)
- Trading Issues (2)
- Uncategorized (2)
- US Climate Ethics (20)
- US Congress and climate change ethics

- Higher sea levels will make storm surges more destructive
- Warmer sea surface temperatures will fuel wind speed

Other potential links between Sandy and climate change are:

- More moisture in the atmosphere causes larger amounts of rain fall
- The unusual path of Sandy may have been affected by an unusual high pressure system which has links to climate change.

(Romm, 2012a)

As Joe Romm has stated:

The answer to the oft-asked question of whether an event is caused by climate change is that it is the wrong question. All weather events are affected by climate change because the environment in which they occur is warmer and moister than it used to be....

(Romm, 2012a)

Because very destructive hurricanes existed before impacts from climate change were measurable, one cannot simply point to high damages alone from a hurricane and deduce that the damages by themselves unequivocally demonstrate the link between hurricane damages and climate change. However one can point to elevated sea levels and sea surface temperatures caused by climate change and conclude that the hurricane damages will on average increase because of climate change.

We therefore conclude that strong connections can be made about the damages to be expected from hurricanes even though one cannot attribute the initiation of any hurricane to climate change alone.

### III. Ethics, Hurricanes, and Climate Change.

So far, almost the entire controversy created by Hurricane Sandy and its connection to climate change as discussed in the US media has been about whether one can attribute direct causation of Sandy to climate change. This is a scientific question and as we have seen there are strong scientific grounds for linking the magnitude of damages from Sandy to climate change, despite the fact that some uncertainties still remain about whether climate change increases the frequency of hurricanes. This issue has not been completely resolved.

Interest in the US press about whether there are links between climate change and hurricane damages appears to be motivated largely by the question of whether adopting climate change policies in the US will prevent even costlier damages to the United States. Most of the press coverage about links between Sandy and climate change follows this line of reasoning at least implicitly. That is the press coverage has treated issues about connections between Sandy and climate change as an issue of interest relevant to national calculations of costs and benefits that would flow from adopting climate change policies. Yet such reasoning ignores several ethical conclusions entailed by understanding that climate change could greatly increase harms to some. These conclusions are:

- Those causing potential serious harms to others have duties and responsibilities to those that they may harm including those outside the United States, and not just economic interests in preventing harms to themselves,
- It is not necessary to establish complete proof that one is harming others before duties to avoid potential harm to others are triggered. A person need only be on notice that his or her actions may be harming others to establish the duty to cease activities that could harm them particularly in cases where the harm to others is grave and the uncertainties cannot be resolved in a timely

(13)

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fashion before the harms are experienced.

- The stronger the possibility that one may harm others, the greater the duty to avoid activities that may harm them.

This ethical reasoning exposes serious problems with how the press has covered the controversy about links between climate change and Hurricane Sandy. The press has treated the issue as if only two possibilities exist. Either there is a link between climate change and the damage caused by Sandy or there is no link. As we have seen this framing ignores the responsibilities of those putting others at risk that are entailed once it is established that links are likely. As we have seen, the science of climate change has long passed this threshold trigger for action.

The US press has also largely ignored likely ties to climate change when extreme weather events in the last few years have taken place in other parts of the world that have wrecked havoc on hundreds of thousands of people including killer floods in Pakistan, Brazil, China, and Australia. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a report in March of last year that linked climate change to increased extreme weather around the world including floods, heat waves, droughts, and heavy precipitation. (IPCC 2012). And so, the US press coverage of Hurricane Sandy can be criticized for not helping Americans understand links between their greenhouse gas emissions and other extreme weather damages around the world. High levels of greenhouse gas emissions in the United States are harming others around the world through extreme weather events.

#### References:

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Romm, Joe (2012b), [Must-Read Trenberth: How To Relate Climate Extremes to Climate Change](http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2012/03/25/451347/must-read-trenberth-how-to-relate-climate-extremes-to-climate-change/) <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2012/03/25/451347/must-read-trenberth-how-to-relate-climate-extremes-to-climate-change/>

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2012). *Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation* [http://www.ipcc.ch/news\\_and\\_events/docs/srex/srex\\_press\\_release.pdf](http://www.ipcc.ch/news_and_events/docs/srex/srex_press_release.pdf)

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November 12, 2012 at 6:23 am

1 comment

Donald A. Brown

## One Response

## Meta



*Leif Knutsen* says:

The very foundation of Western Capitalism is the ability of the few to pollute the commons for profit. The richest Corpro/People in the world, for the most part, are the receipts of that disparity. They fully expect to take that money to their tax sheltered private accounts as humanity is forced to deal with rising seas, polluted mammals, acidified oceans and global climatic disruption. Corpro/People refuse to acknowledge their complicity, in spite of over whelming international scientific evidence to the contrary. Profits from that exploitation has allowed the corporate interest to own the main stream media to secure their blood money. Corpro/People did not buy the media for the profits that they could make, (clearly a losing proposition in its own right), but to disseminate propaganda to PROTECT their exploitative profits as long as possible. The GOP, as well as the Democrats, banks and Wall Street, are all beholden to the "profits from pollution paradigm." Consequently the straight forward "STOP" answer remains elusive, as it affects the hand that feeds them all.

Corporations are people now. So the question remains: How come Corpro/People get to pick the "people" laws that suit them, yet ignore the time tested civil law of not trashing your neighbors property or being? It is past time that capitalism recognize the value of earth's life support systems to the commons, which they have now become part and parcel of, and learn to play nice with their elders.

The GOP do not fund abortion. Fine. A precedent. Why must progressives in part, and humanity in general, fund the ecocide of the planet via tax subsidies and exclusive forced compliance to the ecocide fossil industry?

Conversely, If corporations are people, Why can't I pollute the commons for profit? I get fined for throwing a non-toxic paper cup out the car window. I pay \$150/ ton to take my nontoxic garbage to the dump. Corpro/People get rich from every BTU of fossil fuel used to power the wheels of commerce that are disrupting Earth's life support systems the world over. They dump for free. In fact get tax subsidies! Stop profits from the pollution of the commons. Humanity deserves nothing less.

November 13, 2012 at 5:24 am

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