CLIMATE CHANGE HEATING UP OUR WINTERS: OP-ED

Loaded Dice. The perfect analogy for deciding whether our weirdly warm winter was the result of climate change or luck.

I heard this from climatologist Michael Mann, who visited the University of Connecticut last week to round out this year's Edwin Way Teale Lecture Series. Just as loading the dice with more weight on one side increases the likelihood that the opposite number will appear, so too does loading the atmosphere with carbon dioxide increase the likelihood that winters like the one behind us will greet our future lives.

Remember last winter? Hardly any snow. The roof-rakes stockpiled by merchants sat in inventory. School systems coasted through the season without endless cancellations and delays. Heating bills dropped. Governments shared their snowplow budgets. Golf courses opened early. All of this sounds like good news, depending on your interests and the time and spatial scales you consider.

Beyond personal preferences, annual cycles and regional geographies, however, is a whole planet being convulsed by climate change. Locally and acutely, there will be winners and losers. But globally and chronically, the net effect is negative, especially with respect to the costs of adaptations associated with weather catastrophes, water supplies, and rising sea levels. We are already paying the price for the energy-rich lifestyle we put on a lay-away plan a half-century ago.

I like to ski cross-country. Because trail snow is no longer reliable in Storrs, this year I went north to the interior mountain village of Bethel, Maine. With us in town were skiers competing in the U.S. National championships held annually in nearby Rumford. Astonishingly and discouragingly, they skied through snowless woods on white roads of synthetic snow, a harbinger of things to come. This winter anecdote is consistent with the hard data collected over the past century by the U.S. National Climatic Data Center. Since 1896, winter (Jan-Feb) precipitation has risen more than 11 inches and the average temperature has increased 1.6 degrees Fahrenheit, mostly due to higher winter lows. These trends are terrible for the future of skiing but perfect for mosquitoes and ticks, predicted to be extra nasty this summer.

Let Michael Mann be your climate man. He's the author of the so-called hockey-stick curve, which showed the dramatic warming of the last century relative to the previous millennium. He’s a lead author for the scientific contributions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and thus a shared recipient of the 2007 Nobel Peace Price. He’s a somewhat reticent quantitative scientist who leveraged his undergraduate training in physics and applied math toward a Yale doctorate in geology and geophysics en route to co-directing the Earth and Environmental Systems Institute at Penn State.

In international news, he was harassed and then cleared of wrongdoing in the climate-gate fiasco several years ago. With backing from national scientific organizations, he survived a politically-motivated witch hunt by the attorney general and legislators in Virginia, who didn't like the implications of his work. Though a self-confessed "accidental and reluctant public figure" he's accepted responsibility for national leadership on this issue. And for your individual utility, he's a blogger for the respected non-partisan website RealClimate.org, where the latest climate news is treated with the scientific integrity it deserves.

During a collegial conversation with Mann before his talk, he answered a question that's been puzzling me for years: Why are those who deny or minimize the gravity of climate change overwhelmingly Republican in their political leanings? His answer went deeper than market
freedoms and individual lifestyles to the more general concerns of government regulation and national autonomy. Like it or not, coping with global climate consequences requires more regulation and more international cooperation, a double anathema for the elephants now on the campaign trail.

Beneath the obvious science, economics and politics of climate change lies the broader domain of ethics. The world we hand off to future generations of humans and to other species is now being shaped by the choices each of us makes every day.