ICE JAM GOOD THEATER, BUT IT'S NO CATASTROPHE

This year's ice jam on the Connecticut River was a potentially dangerous spectacle, making it a perfect stage for political theater.

It was also a perfectly natural, noncatastrophic event that, to my dismay, was distorted by the media.

Slipping away from the grime and sleaze of Washington, D.C., U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Greenwich, came north to grandstand in an icy scene in Haddam where the river narrows to only 881 feet.

Grabbing the wheel of a Coast Guard ice cutter, Connecticut's senior senator praised the agency while crunching his way through slabs of jagged ice: "We're in the midst of a budget fight, and I wanted to be very aggressive and effective advocating for the Coast Guard."

Coast Guard crews did work full time for up to two weeks to clear an ice jam that damaged a waterside marina and a few docks. And the town of Haddam declared an emergency on Jan. 17, even though the state police reported no actual emergencies.

I was delighted by the beauty of broken ice, and to hear a sense of awe expressed by witnesses to this spectacle. Being reminded of nature's power keeps human hubris in check.

Northern rivers freeze as a routine part of their hydrology. In most years, a flat sheet of ice is lifted by rising water and broken into floes that float downstream, often jamming together above narrow spots. This has been happening ever since the glacier left us about 17,000 years ago.

Nevertheless, our appetite for heroic literature steps in, demanding that the routine give-and-take between humans and their habitats become a pitched battle between us and nature. The ice becomes a powerful, albeit beautiful, enemy. Military saviors fight the valiant fight. One headline read: "Coast Guard Cutters Persist vs. Frozen Foe." The texts use words like danger, smash, tackle, attack, liberate, destruction, power, bravery.

Alas, confrontational dualism sells better than deference to and prudent interaction with a broader view of nature.

I was baffled by Blumenthal's comment: "The environmental impact of the ice on this river can be very costly and long-lasting." What, pray tell, does he mean?

In environmental management, the word "impact" denotes an anticipated or unanticipated consequence caused by human intervention with a so-called natural system. Clear examples are the expected loss of migrating fish caused by the building of a dam, or the unexpected loss of bald eagles from the spraying of too much DDT.

In this context, the environment cannot impact itself. River ice is simply part of the river hydrology, which underlies river ecology, which has included human beings for millennia. Ice-bruised trees, backwater flooding and broken marinas are not, per se, environmental impacts.

On the other hand, an increased severity of ice-jams due to human intervention can be considered an anticipated environmental impact. It doesn't take an engineer to realize that the two piers of the swing bridge at Haddam obstruct the downriver flow of floes, making the jams worse.
And perhaps Blumenthal also knows that the extra severity of ice jams might be a genuine unanticipated environmental impact of human-induced climate change. Here's the robustly plausible, but not yet proven, theory.

Our addiction to fossil fuels has warmed the Arctic. This allows its polar vortex (low pressure above the pole) to expand and contract with greater amplitude. Simultaneously, the weaker temperature gradient between the pole and equator is weakening our northern jet stream. This makes it more vulnerable to vortex expansions and to blocking high pressure zones. In turn, this causes the jet stream to meander with greater amplitudes, creating deep troughs of colder arctic air followed by deeper troughs of warmer subtropical air.

This climatological theory matches the weather responsible for creating this winter's remarkable ice jams. Intense December cold followed by intense January warmth and rain froze, lifted and launched more powerful floes. If this is the new normal, then Blumenthal is right to consider the ice jam as an unanticipated environmental impact - one of millions trickling down upon us from above.