

Will L.A. lose its cool? An optimistic look at global warming

A Q&A with Matthew Kahn, author of 'Climatopolis: How Our Cities Will Thrive in the Hotter Future.'

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Global warming is a given, writes UCLA economist Matthew Kahn in his new book, "Climatopolis: How Our Cities Will Thrive in the Hotter Future." But Kahn's perspective on this isn't gloomy: He says we could flourish in warmer climes. With pop-culture-friendly references sprinkled throughout, the book examines what weather patterns will look like across the nation in the next 50 to 60 years.

Kahn creates optimistic blueprints for how life might unfold in 2070. He imagines New York City-style high rises by the beach, ponders whether koi ponds are the best use of our water supply, and considers whether moats should be built around the mansions of Malibu. He writes of making the most of it and of happy endings are not what we're used to reading in works on global warming.

The author discussed his book with the Los Angeles Times.

In the section "Will L.A. Lose Its Cool?", you mention two computer models that predict L.A. County will be 13 degrees warmer, on average, in July 2070. What will this mean for us?

Look at the heat wave that hit us this summer. It was 70 degrees in Malibu and 107 degrees in Palm Springs. Malibu is just not going to get that hot. We could rebuild Santa Monica, and increase its population density, New York City-style, so more people could live near the ocean.

You've heard the phrase: "Good news is bad news for the environmental movement." If our goal is to fight climate change now, some environmentalists might dislike my book because I'm saying we could cope in the future. There is a lot of evidence that we can cope with change, that we are not mice, and we have big brains. I don't want to oversimplify, however. There will be losers.

"Climate change will strip away much of California's climate uniqueness." Can you discuss?

A beautiful part of California is how temperate our summers are, and how mild our winters. From what I've seen in climate change models, a 75-degree average in August in Los Angeles will become an 88-degree average in August 2070. There will, however, be large variations (cooler by the beach, and much hotter near Palm Springs).

But it's different strokes for different folks. Palm Springs-lovers will love Pasadena as Pasadena gets hotter. Others, who prefer cooler temperatures, might prefer a Santa Monica high-rise. People who are bugged by heat will have to live by the coast.

You say, "Climate change can't alter the blue skies or access to the beach and mountains," but there will be more fires. Explain how that will affect L.A. specifically.

Malibu is famous for their fires. There are certain fire zones in Malibu, that if it gets hotter there, will go up in flames faster. The people in Malibu should pay a higher insurance premium. There should be discounts if you

build your home with better and fire-resistant materials and for landscaping property so homes are less prone to fire risk (consider water encircling the home, like a moat). Insurance companies should be able to price the risk posed by climate change. I do want the people of L.A. to face the cost of their actions.

You note that 80% of the state's water goes to agriculture and that 40% of the state's water goes to growing four crops: cotton, rice, alfalfa and pasturage, which account for just 1% of the state's annual income. In the future, would it be prudent for cities to buy their water from farmers?

Farmers bailing out the city? There's a historic tension. But economists would say, if urbanites value a gallon of water more than the farmers do, then it makes sense for the farmers to sell you that water.

There's a whole new field of water law coming about. Who owns California's water? Will we allow the farmers to sell the water? Climate change may force us to get rid of our crazy outdated laws.

Global warming might make other cities more appealing. You mention that Detroit might actually thrive. Will people move out of L.A.?

Every city is different. How they will deal with climate change will be different. If a city like L.A. started to go to hell, a mayor would have an incentive to try to make this a green city again. Cities compete against each other for highly skilled workers. If people continually moved out of Los Angeles, a mayor would have a major headache because he'd lose his tax base.

You write: "At the end of the day, the story will have a happy ending." How do you know?

The only scenario where I have doubt is if we saw very abrupt climate change. Our ability -- like "Star Trek's" Mr. Spock -- to be forward-looking allows us to make plans for our future and to protect our families. I'm trying to chip away at this victim's view that Mother Nature will throw nasty blows. There will be some nasty blows, but we can prepare.

I would pay a fair amount for climate change not to occur. But I want to ask how we ride this like a good surfer instead of wiping out.

In your last chapter, you mention birds, butterflies and other animals. How will various creatures fare?

Dan Blumstein [chairman of UCLA's Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology] recently published a report [showing] that marmots are getting stronger and faster due to climate change. I agree that the marmot isn't the key to the food chain. And it's an over-exaggeration to say we're like the marmot. But it is an example of an animal that is thriving.

I also talk about sharks that can travel large distances, camels that can hold water -- evolution has prepared certain creatures. Creatures flying naked, searching for food all day, may not fare as well. For us, human capital can protect us, in a way.