

TEARS IN RAIN:

WILL CLIMATE CHANGE

CLAIM CAPE ANN?

by Robert Newton

“What if?” is the core question that seeds every science fiction story. In Franklin Schaffner’s 1968 film “Planet Of The Apes,” it’s “What if humans were no longer the dominant species?”

In Richard Fleischer’s “Soylent Green” (1973), it’s “What if we killed the oceans and our overcrowded planet ran out of food?”

In Ridley Scott’s “Blade Runner” (1982), it’s “What if androids became self-aware?”

When I think of a possible climate-changed future for our beloved island community of Cape Ann, this last film comes to mind most of all. During the film's powerful climax, the rogue android Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) and Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) – the future cop tasked with “retiring” Batty – do battle on the roof of a dilapidated, rain-drenched L.A. Building. When Batty reconciles the imminent arrival of his pre-programmed “expiration” date, he shows a newfound compassion for humanity, sparing Deckard's life and spinning an unforgettable (and entirely improvised) 42-word soliloquy, recalling his short but magnificent life:

“I've seen things you people wouldn't believe...

Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion...

I've watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser Gate...

All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die."

What if we don't get our act together?

Cape Ann's own "What if?" when it comes to the effects of extreme climate change is ultimately "What if we can't adapt?"

Will the island die?

Will the water wash us away?

A conservative estimate of sea level rise in the next Thirty years is 10-12 inches. It may not sound like much, but it is just one wet rung on a long, horrible

ladder that could change or destroy the things that make Cape Ann Cape Ann.

By 2050, the Field House at Gloucester High School will be in hospice care, if it is usable at all. While that 2018 blizzard that flooded the athletic field and adjoining parking lot – destroying dozens of cars – did prompt some forward-thinking mitigation in the form of a 2023 flood wall; we can't build a wall around the whole island.

And isn't it a bit vainglorious of us to think that we can put a genie as fearsome as this back into its bottle? In the same way, the massive engineering project Big Dig was only a temporary cure for Boston traffic, so will be any band-aid solution we

throw at the encroaching sea unless we can limit the warming of the planet.

“It’s only a couple of degrees...”

1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) is a the number you may have heard about climate change. But what does it mean? But, it’s shorthand for the global average surface warming above “pre-Industrial” temperatures, referring to the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, though the baseline data that NOAA uses is from the period between 1850 and 1900.

In 2015, 196 parties – 98% of the world – signed The Paris Agreement is a legally binding accord to try to

keep the global temperature from rising beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius, beyond which life for humans becomes increasingly more difficult. It went into effect in 2016.

The Paris Agreement mandates countries to establish and regularly update national climate strategies, known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). These plans outline each country's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to climate change. To ensure transparency and accountability, countries must also report on their emissions and progress toward achieving their climate goals. The effectiveness of the Paris Agreement hinges on the

ambition and implementation of these individual NDCs. (In 2017, former President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. – second only to China in contributing to climate change – from this agreement, which President Joe Biden reinstated on his first day in office in 2021.)

“Come on, it’s not going to be that bad.”

What might Cape Ann look like in the coming century if the causes of climate change go unchecked?

It’s not a pretty picture:

GLOUCESTER

- Goose Cove Reservoir in Gloucester, one of the main sources of Gloucester’s drinking water, is very

close to the Annisquam River, and Atlantic sea water seeping in would render it undrinkable.

- East Gloucester and Eastern Point will become their own islands.

- Mill Pond will swallow up the grounds of O'Malley Innovation Middle School and some of the adjacent, low-lying neighborhoods.

- The City of Gloucester's Pollution Control Facility on Gloucester's Causeway is very near sea level as it is, and therefore very vulnerable to rising sea levels.

Recent improvements anticipate this rise – a chemical tower above the 100-year floodplain and a perimeter flood barrier.

ROCKPORT

- Rockport's Motif No. 1, the iconic red fishing shack

that is, Rockport itself has fallen in a storm before (in the Blizzard of '78), and most likely will again, and more often. Likewise, the surrounding Rockport Harbor will sustain more regular storm damage, eventually affecting infrastructure.

- The seasonal window for shops on Rockport's Bearskin Neck to make it or break it is already short enough. Throw in regular hatch-battening from extreme storms, and the Neck may start looking like the moribund Liberty Tree Mall, dotted with long-term vacancies.

ESSEX

- The Causeway in Essex – already facing serious calamity during super-high tides – will be just... gone. The Essex River will claim the Shipbuilding

Museum and many of the unique homes and businesses in the Historic District.

MANCHESTER

- Manchester Harbor would grow... but not in a good way. Encroaching waters would inundate the Harbor, affecting infrastructure, industry, and recreation. The charming Singing Beach would erode, and the natural storm protection offered by its dunes would be lost.

Time to die?

There's an ironic parallel in effect here. In 1938, the Central Massachusetts towns of Dana (located in Worcester County), Enfield, Greenwich, and Prescott (all located in Hampshire County) were seized by

eminent domain and intentionally flooded to create the Quabbin Reservoir, the major source of water for metropolitan Boston. Nearly a century later, these four lost towns exist as mere footnotes; local curiosities occasionally rolled out in quaint presentations at local libraries.

Will the intentional flooding we are creating by birthing the toxic twins of climate change and sea level rise doom Cape Ann, to a similar fate, to be lost in time... like tears in the rain?