

Memories Of An Old World Traveller

I have always loved the idea of flying. The sensations of exhilarating weightlessness and the innate joy of seeing the world from the eyes of eagles is what first drew me to hot air balloons. Ever since then, in all the 92 years of my existence, there is not a country or a city that I have not visited. I have traversed the globe in my crimson and gold balloon, witnessing the stunning peaks of the Himalayas, tasting the spices of Asia and beholding the beauty of the Alaskan Northern Lights. But there is one thing that never ceases to amaze me. It is the ever-changing backdrop to the tapestries of the world: the climate.

The earth's climate is remarkably complex. It is the amalgamation of several geographical measures, ranging from temperature, rainfall, humidity and atmospheric pressure. It is so intricate that climate models require sophisticated computer programmes to try and simulate the Earth's climate system. But to me, climate has always been an inherently human concept. Through my voyages across the world, I have come to realise that climate intrinsically contours people's lives, their society and ultimately their cultures.

In the early years of my life as an aeronaut, I had the privilege of visiting India. Though the exotic foods and music of India amazed me, the myriad of climatic diversity is what really blew my mind. India boasts six major climatic subtypes ranging from the arid deserts in the west, alpine tundra and glaciers in the north and humid tropical rainforests in the south-west. Particularly, the birdsong of the pied crested cuckoo heralds the arrival of the magnificent summer monsoon. This essential weather pattern, brought on by the humid climate, is the life-blood of India. It quenches the thirst of paddy fields, revitalises rivers and powers hospitals, schools and businesses through hydroelectric power. Every year the monsoon is marked by extravagant festivals that paint India in vibrant powders, flowers and lights. To the Indians, the monsoon means salvation, the renewal of life and hope for the future.

Journeying north in my hot air balloon, brought me to the coldest and harshest biome on earth: the arctic tundra. This polar climate zone, characterised by dry winters and freezing temperatures, borders the Arctic and encompasses several countries from Canada to Russia. Home to the hardest flora and fauna, this treeless ecosystem perfectly symbolises nature's delicate beauty. Despite being blanketed in snow for the majority of the year, for a few precious summer months, life flourishes. Lichen and small wildflowers hungrily consume the precious sunlight, with flower buds bursting forth in a few short days to form a beautiful carpet of petals.

The clamour of migrating snow geese provides the perfect soundtrack to the rapid surge of life catalysed by the warmer temperatures. This change in weather is essential for Inuit tribes who depend on the tundra climate for survival. Tribes, such as the Western Arctic Inuit, base their livelihoods on tundra climate, adapting their diets and settlements according to the season. Therefore, it is easy to see how the tundra climate shapes the plants, animals and the humans that inhabit this ecosystem.

This story is repeated across the world. In every location, in every ecosystem and biome, the climate is a living force that dictates abiotic and biotic interactions and ultimately forms human societies that are uniquely adapted to the conditions of their regions. This is why climate continues to captivate me. Where ever I have travelled, the climate is never the same, it is just as personal and distinctive as the people who live there.

But as I aged and retired from my voyaging, my balloon resting in my shed, I saw that the climate was drastically shifting. From my window, I sensed that the winds of change were billowing through the atmosphere and disrupting the delicate balance that once governed our climate. Humanity's actions have pushed the climate to its extremes, with global warming bringing the world to its knees. The oceans fattened by melting ice caps assault shorelines, claiming lives and habitats. Fertile forests and arctic wildernesses are being eaten up by urban motorways and metropolitan jungles. Wildfires ravage the earth, leaving trails of blackened wastelands behind. It is safe to say that humanity is facing an existential crisis of a scale never before encountered.

So I dusted off my hot air balloon, and went on my final journey, to witness humanity's response to this crisis and to see with my own eyes whether change was possible.

I realised that climate change affects specific regions entirely differently and hence an individualistic approach is needed for society to cope with alterations in the weather. High in the Peruvian Andes, agronomists have begun to breed strains of drought, flood and frost resistant potatoes to ensure food security for years to come. Ecologists in the wildernesses of Australia are using preventive measures such as back-burning to prevent the onset of wildfires. In the Himalayas, engineers are constructing artificial glaciers to trap summer melt-water, in order to provide clean water for Inuit tribes during the arid winter months. In the grasslands of Africa, farmers are adopting conservative agricultural methods to maximise the usage of water to irrigate their crops and ensure that not a single drop is wasted. In Britain, coastal areas such

as Norfolk and Cornwall, are taking measures to reduce the damage inflicted by flooding. By dredging rivers, creating embankments and floodwalls, councils are attempting to limit loss of life and destruction of property. All of these are excellent examples of adaptive strategies, which are aimed at coping with the impacts of climate change and crucially stimulating humanity to develop resilience to the disastrous power of nature.

However, if humanity is to completely solve the problem of global warming, a unified, and holistic approach is needed to mitigate climate change, on both a global and individual scale. Research and funding should continue to be conducted into renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power, with the ultimate hope of completely eliminating our reliance on fossil fuels. Deforestation should be halted and instead, afforestation programmes should be enforced to reclaim lost woodlands and reduce global concentrations of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. Industries should be encouraged to shift their production to sustainable, recyclable items that are durable and long-lasting. On an individual scale, people should feel empowered to make changes to their diets, their transport and their shopping decisions that can have significant effects on global companies. If all these changes are acted upon, then and only then, can humanity stand a chance of survival.

As I sit here, next to my open window at my writing desk typing this article, I am reminded of all my journeys across the world and all the climates that I have witnessed. I am also aware, looking at my wrinkled fingers, of how little time I have left on this earth to make a difference and create change. As a gentle breeze flutters in through the window I realise that “sometimes we need to expose ourselves to the winds of change in order to find our true direction.