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# Hurricane Sandy and the Difference between Climate Mitigation and Adaptation

[Jeremy Brown](#) October 29, 2013

Today marks the [one year anniversary](#) of when [Hurricane Sandy made landfall](#). News outlets have covered virtually [every angle](#), from the [recovery](#) to the adequacy of [insurance payouts](#).

As at the time of the storm, many commentators are [pointing](#) to Sandy as evidence that climate change is underway. The storm, it is said, was a canary's warning of the extreme weather that awaits us, and the devastation Sandy wrought should motivate us to reign in greenhouse gas emissions and plan for future disasters.

Preventing climate change and adapting to it are thematically connected but substantively different enterprises. A climate mitigation strategy (like electric cars) might provide little help with adaptation, while an [adaptation strategy](#) (like buying out low-lying properties vulnerable to rising sea levels) might offer no mitigation benefits. In fact, as policy priorities, climate mitigation and climate adaptation could compete over limited political, financial, and administrative resources; at times, the two could even conflict.

Still, mitigation and adaptation are often [conflated](#). In 2011, the environmental news service *Grist* posted a [story](#) on the "10 most climate-ready cities in the U.S." The story was on the 10 greenest cities, those had been most proactive about decreasing their climate impacts. A couple weeks later, *Grist* ran another [piece](#) that actually was about the cities that could best cope with climate change.

There was relatively little overlap between the two lists, and many of the cities on the list of most adaptive cities found their way there not through their own doings but through dumb luck. As always, geography is a blessing and curse.

Greenest Cities	Most Adaptive Cities
San Francisco	<a href="#">Cleveland</a>
Seattle	Milwaukee
Portland	Detroit
Washington, DC	Chicago
Denver	Minneapolis
San Diego	Indianapolis
New York/ Philadelphia (tie)	Atlanta
San Jose	Seattle
Chicago	Nashville
	Jacksonville

### Climate Mitigation

Climate change is a classic [tragedy of the commons](#), on a global scale. California can position itself as a climate pacesetter by developing policies or technologies that other states may later wish to adopt, but it cannot single-handedly stop climate change, even if it shuts every last one of its power plants.

Whatever benefits California accrues from its mitigation policies, its great [rival](#) Texas will also accrue in equal measure (as will the rest of the world); California cannot prevent Texas – or China or India or any other jurisdictions – from enjoying the benefits of its carbon sacrifices while making no equivalent sacrifices of their own.

So although the world as a whole has an economic interest in acting to prevent climate change, individual nations, provinces, and metropolitan regions do not. To make climate mitigation policies more politically attractive, advocates often justify those policies on non-climate grounds.

(I use the term "mitigation policy" loosely, to refer to any governmental policy that is aimed at reducing greenhouse gases. The classification is based on intent more than on actual impact (though, ideally, there is a correlation between the two). It could include regulations covering energy, utilities, transportation, land use, or other areas of law.)

A mitigation policy could offer numerous secondary benefits. A policy might, for instance, promote public health, create jobs, result in more livable communities, or advance the efforts of a particular jurisdiction to brand itself as being [green](#). A jurisdiction could thus have an economic interest in the steps needed to reduce emissions without having an economic interest in the actual end-goal of reduced emissions.

Indeed, the policies that mainstream climate advocates promote reflect an inherent recognition of the economic costs of climate mitigation. These policies do not propose to end the underlying cause of climate change – industrialism – but to reshape that cause so as to move us toward a "low-carbon," "low-impact," "high-efficiency," "sustainable" future. Simply put, the policies are a compromise between two priorities that exist in a natural tension – sparing the atmosphere and maintaining the developed world lifestyles that have pummeled that atmosphere.

To the extent that advocates cite to the marginal impact that the policies have on slowing climate change, they are framing the policy benefits in psychic rather than economic terms; they are appealing to moral or aesthetic values.

### Climate Adaptation

While national, provincial, and local governments do not have economic incentive to mitigate climate impacts, they have ample economic incentive to prepare for warmer temperatures, [rising sea levels](#), and more extreme weather events.

One theme in climate preparedness literature is that [certain parts](#) of the world, and of the United States, are more vulnerable to climate change than others. Earlier this year, *Rolling Stone* published a haunting piece on mid-twenty-first-century Miami, calling it an [American Atlantis](#). Other cities frequently identified as being at greatest risk are in low-lying coastal areas or the desert Southwest.

For decades, people have been moving from comparatively climate-adaptable cities in the Northeast and Midwest to more vulnerable cities in the Sunbelt. The threat of climate change is unlikely to reverse this migration, making the potential impact of climate change within the United States that much greater.

Like Hurricane Katrina, Sandy drew attention to potential vulnerabilities and illustrated the sorts of damages that climate change could ultimately inflict with greater frequency and force. The superstorm inspired numerous studies and reports that recommended adaptation strategies for metropolitan New York. Environmentalists said it should serve as a wakeup call for other regions that have ignored or denied the onset of climate change.

The Sandy anniversary stories this week serve as a sobering reminder of the [challenges](#) of adaptation and yet also of the potential to rally diffuse stakeholders around a grand and forward-looking undertaking.

[climate change](#)

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