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I Lost My Home to the Climate Crisis. You Could Too.

Greenville offers a glimpse of our future under climate change.

By Jane Braxton Little

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A home burns as flames from the Dixie fire tear through Plumas County, Calif., on July 24, 2021. (Michael Nigro / LightRocket via Getty Images)

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The Nation

At 10 AM on July 22, I interviewed a New York University professor about using autonomous robots, drones, and other unmanned devices to suppress structural and wildland fires. I sent the interview to an online transcription service, walked down the steps of my second-floor office and a block to the Greenville post office, where I mailed a check to California Fair Plan for homeowners' fire insurance. I then drove 25 miles to a dental appointment. I was lucky to make it home before burning debris closed the roads.

That night I became a climate refugee, evacuated from my house thanks to the Dixie Fire. Since then, it's scorched a landscape nearly the size of Delaware, destroyed 678 houses and decimated several communities in Indian Valley, where I've been for 46 years. One of them was Greenville, California, a town founded in the Gold Rush era of the 19th century, where I happen to live. I never imagined myself among the 55 million people worldwide whose lives have already been upended by climate change. Maybe no one does until it happens, even though we're obviously the future for significant parts of humanity. Those of us who acknowledge the climate disaster—especially those who write about it—may be the last to picture ourselves fleeing the catastrophes scientists have been predicting.

Climate change should come as no surprise to any of us, even in Greenville, one of four communities in rural Plumas County tucked into the mountains of the northern Sierra Nevada range, 230 miles northeast of San Francisco. No one would call most of us progressive. We're a social mishmash of loggers, miners, and ranchers, many of whom strongly supported Donald Trump (despite a disparate population of aging hippies living among us). We squabble over water ditches and whose insurance should cover which parade. We picked to death a solar-power project and took five years to decide on a

design for a community building. The town has been in decline since I moved there nearly half a century ago, slowly sinking into its dirt foundations.

Despite Greenville's insularity, we've had some inkling that the world is changing around us. Old-timers talk about the winters when so much snow fell that they had to shovel from second-story windows to get out of their houses. Last winter, we got less than three feet of snow. In the 1980s, a warm March storm flooded Indian Valley with melted snow that floated stacks of newly sawn lumber away from a local sawmill into a just-created lake. We all cheered as brazen cowboys lassoed bundles of two-by-fours and hauled them off in their pickup trucks.

In a megadrought-ridden West, precipitation currently is half the normal amount, making it prospectively the driest year since 1894. Today, such modest clues to a changing climate seem quaint indeed in the face of the evidence now bombarding California and the rest of the West. As in recent years, this summer's fires began breaking out here far earlier than the norm. Already 647 wildfires have burned 4.9 million acres of the West, an area three times the size of Rhode Island. In California, 31 new fires started on August 30th alone—and any significant rain or snow is undoubtedly still months away.

For me, as for the rest of us in Plumas County, the Dixie Fire delivered the reality of climate change in a raging fury that has forever changed our lives. It started July 13th in the Feather River Canyon, a 5,000-foot gorge that carries water to more than 25 million Californians through the State Water Project. Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E) has built a series of power stations here that dammed the former trophy-trout stream and converted its cascading energy into electricity, generating around 15 percent of California's hydropower. At approximately seven o'clock that Tuesday morning, a hydroelectric facility lost power at Cresta in the lower Feather River Canyon. Officials later reported a "healthy green tree" leaning perilously against a conductor on a pole with a fire burning on the ground near the base of that tree. By evening, that micro-blaze had exploded to 1,000 acres.

Over the next 14 days what came to be known as the Dixie Fire whipped up one side canyon and down another, driving residents out of the town of Indian Falls and incinerating their homes. It demolished Canyon Dam at the southern end of Lake Almanor. The inhabitants of the towns of Crescent Mills, then Greenville, and soon after Taylorsville fled. Some of us returned for a night or two, only to heed the sirens blaring from our cell phones mandating another evacuation. Believe me, we left in a panic: pizza parlors with dough still rising; beauty salons with hair littering the floor; offices with phones ringing. We fled on whatever roads remained open to wherever we could find housing or friends willing to take us in.

On August 4, we watched from our separate hells as a 40,000-foot cloud the color of bruised flesh collapsed over the ridge west of Greenville. It was soon hurling flaming branches and red-hot embers down the mountainside, torching trees as it roared into town. We were transfixed by horror, snatching previously unimaginable images from Facebook, chasing down Twitter links, and trying to make sense of the devastation evolving on infrared maps.

We were witnessing Greenville's near-obliteration. The Dixie Fire would thunder right down Main Street with its Western false fronts and tarnished Gold Rush charm. The 150-year-old warehouse converted to a museum years ago flamed up in a blaze of black-and-white photos, historic logging tools, and the genealogy of generations of the Mountain Maidu, the local Native American tribe. Fire gutted the brick-walled Masonic Lodge and the Way Station, our only local watering hole. Much of the town we had fled burned to the ground.

HOTTER AND DRIER

The old-timers didn't tell us about fires like this. I witnessed nothing remotely as turbulent during a long-ago season as a fire lookout on Dyer Mountain near Lake Almanor. Even firefighters (and my husband used to be one of them) hardened by a decade of recent experience say that this fire is behaving unlike anything they were trained to confront or have ever seen. It has them bamboozled as it circles back toward landscapes it's already burned, storming through magic forests of old-growth red fir and stately stands of sugar pines, their foot-long cones just beginning to mature.

Dixie is roaring through forests transformed by a changing climate. The planet is simply hotter than it used to be. Worldwide temperatures have increased 2.04 degrees Fahrenheit since 1901. The United States has been warming even faster, adding 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit since 1970. In the Sierra Nevada, the 450-mile-long tilted block of granite that lies on California's border with Nevada, a recent study by climate scientists at UCLA suggested that temperatures could rise a phenomenal 7 to 10 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century. All that heat is grilling brush and small trees practically to the point of spontaneous combustion, priming them for the smallest spark. Scientists say that the number of days when Sierra forests are likely to burn has increased by 5 percent since the 1970s.

Nighttime temperatures are also rising, further confounding the efforts of firefighters to control such blazes. They count on cooler air and higher humidity after dark to help them in aggressive attacks. According to researchers at the Western Regional Climate Center in Reno, California's overnight lows are now running about 2 degrees Fahrenheit above the average for the 1981-2010 period that climate scientists use as a benchmark. Robbed of their after-dark advantages, firefighters report seeing flames torching off the crowns of trees in the middle of the night, something they're not faintly used to.

The Sierra air is drier, too. We used to brag about our low humidity, mocking our East Coast friends dripping sweat on a 90-degree day while we basked in dry heat. Now, that's a liability. Decreasing relative humidity has helped boost the number of days each year when forests are vulnerable to wildfire. It also accelerates evaporation from leaves, brush, and even dead trees, heightening the risk of intense fires and so exacerbating the challenge for firefighters.

Then there's the wind. Once upon a time, on hot Sierra summer days, we welcomed the breezes that stirred the air and cooled us. This summer, the least stirring of leaves instills fear. Dixie's erratic winds have, in fact, blown flames right back into previously burned areas, circling around the lines firefighters have built to try to control the fire.

Climate change doesn't start wildfires. The vast majority are caused by human activity. But by drying out trees, chaparral, and other vegetation, it creates a warmer, more arid world, one ever more susceptible to extreme fire behavior. PG&E, which owns more than 130,000 acres of California, has reported an increase in fire vulnerability in the area it serves from 15 percent in 2019 to 50 percent by 2021.

The utility company has all but admitted responsibility for starting the Dixie Fire. If that proves true it would be the fourth such wildfire linked to it, a record that reeks of blatant neglect of fundamental power-line maintenance. PG&E officials have touted their routine inspections of the two power poles located where the fire started. They found nothing wrong, they reported to the California Public Utilities Commission. But the company also considers the span of power line near where the fire started to be among the top 20 percent of its distribution lines most likely to ignite a wildfire by tree contact. Keep in mind that the Dixie Fire started less than a mile from where PG&E's power lines started the 2018 Camp Fire, which killed 85 people and burned 18,804 buildings.

Will corporate executives be held accountable for the Dixie Fire? Will they lose any sleep over the burly backhoe operator weeping publicly about the loss of his home with its newly remodeled kitchen? Will they spare a thought for the weary family of seven wandering through Safeway wondering how, as exiles, they'll even pay for their groceries?

CLIMATE REFUGEES

All of us who live in the mountainous West have come to expect wildfires. We don't pack up at the first puff of smoke. During the early days after Dixie had started 50 miles down the Feather River Canyon from Greenville, I felt safe. Even when burning trees were visible from my office window as I grabbed photos and notebooks to evacuate, I still felt confident that I would return to my books and 40 years of journalism files, pieces ranging from local murders to ones on refugees from the Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant disaster in Fukushima, Japan, and forest fires burning in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in the Ukraine.

It took two more days before the winds shifted, blowing flames down North Canyon toward the town, overwhelming our firefighters. Today, all that's left in Greenville's downtown commercial area is devastation. The places I knew for so long are now gone, including Hunter Hardware, the business that welcomed us when my husband and I moved to Indian Valley, two blond toddlers in tow; Sterling Sage, where I bought jewelry for my granddaughter from the town's most dapper businessman; and Village Drug, where our Plumas County supervisor took calls from constituents while dispensing medicines and school supplies. That was, in fact, Greenville's oldest building and housed the office I shared with a poet/playwright and a corporate administrator with a passion for knitting that we liked to call Fiber, Fact, and Fiction. Now, it's all ash.

How do you weigh the loss of such businesses against the hundreds of friends, neighbors, and acquaintances whose homes have been destroyed? Most of us waited days for some kind of confirmation about whether ours had made it or not, hanging on every word from state fire officials who described the advancing flames in twice-daily video meetings. We searched the Internet for shards of information and poured over maps with tiny red heat dots that might spell out our futures.

I danced for joy when I learned that my house had indeed survived, along with the timber-frame barn my husband had built from our own hand-milled timber. My ebullience plummeted into mourning for the sweet recluse who lost his beloved books and the widow whose family photos were all gone. Along Main Street in the town's historic residential area, not a house remains, not even a single standing wall among brick walkways and charred garden plots.

Those 678 homeless neighbors of ours join millions around the world fleeing cyclones, hurricanes, fires, and floods, among other weather events brought to a boil by a changing climate. Like the majority of them, the fire that forced us to leave our homes was local and, given the size of this planet, relatively small-scale. It dominated the news cycle for a week or two before being displaced (without being faintly extinguished) by those fleeing hurricane Ida in Louisiana and political refugees trying to escape Afghanistan.

Greenville has plenty of experience with privation. As the county's least affluent town we've rallied to keep our high school open when county officials planned to close it. We've rallied to install sidewalks and retain a health clinic after our only hospital closed. We may disagree about everything from who should be fire chief to the value of Covid vaccinations, but bully Greenville with an outside threat and we're as one. The enemies of our enemies become our friends.

Today, we are facing a threat like no other. How do you rebuild a community with no post office, no library, and where, in the absence of public transportation, the closest gas station is now a 50-mile round trip? Who will step forward for those too broken to restore themselves?

Greenville and Indian Valley are now poised between devastation and possibility. Even as smoke still rises from the ashes, there are faint signs of hope. The generation that left for far-flung parts of the world has organized online donations and relief sites offering food, laptops, vehicles, and cash to the newly homeless. There are plans to expand the community garden from a concept and empty raised beds to a future bounty of vegetables, fruits, and flowers. After a century of genocide and abuse, the Mountain Maidu, the area's first residents, have energized us with their vision of land and species restoration as they assume stewardship of around 3,000 acres of their ancestral territories. Some of us want to mount the works of local artists as four-by-four posters beautifying the fences designed to protect us from the toxic waste of burned-out buildings. Others are planning to stage local musical events on the lawn of the high school that somehow miraculously survived.

It's a long, tough climb from incineration to inspiration for a community that's physically scattered and emotionally shattered. Many of us remain in mind-numbing limbo, still awaiting word from some anonymous official that will allow us to return to homes, if we have them. Those of us allowed back, as my husband and I have been, are halted by National Guard troops and required to show paperwork proving that we belong here. We have little prospect of Internet or landline telephone service any time soon and we no longer expect consistent electricity from PG&E.

What may save us is the very reputation for defiance that has often been our undoing. We don't accept defeat easily, not even against an adversary as daunting as climate change. As long as the odds are stacked against us, the independent and ornery will respond. If the soul of a community is its resilience, Greenville will revive. Still, we're just a hint of what's to come in this country and on this planet if all of us don't change things in major ways. Remember, you could become a climate refugee too.

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