

Florida Goes Down the Drain



By [Gail Collins](#)

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On Miami Beach, rising sea levels have interesting consequences. The ocean periodically starts bubbling up through local drainpipes. By the time it's over, the concept of "going down to the water" has extended to stepping off the front porch.

It's becoming a seasonal event, like swallows at Capistrano or the return of the buzzards to Hinckley, Ohio.

"At the spring and fall high tides, we get flooding of coastal areas," said Leonard Berry, the director of the Florida Center for Environmental Studies. "You've got saltwater coming up through the drains, into the garages and sidewalks and so on, damaging the Ferraris and the Lexuses."

Ah, climate change. A vast majority of scientific studies that take a stand on global warming have concluded that it's caused by human behavior. The results are awful. The penguins are dwindling. The polar bears are running out of ice floes. The cornfields are drying. The southwest is frying.

There is very little on the plus side. Except maybe for Detroit. As [Jennifer Kingson reported in The Times this week](#), one scientific school of thought holds that while temperatures rise and weather becomes extreme in other parts of the country, Detroit's location will turn it into a veritable garden spot.

Miami is probably not used to being compared unfavorably to Detroit. But there you are. "We're going to wander around shin-deep in the ocean — on the streets of Miami," said Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, who is planning to go on a climate-change tour this month with Florida's senior senator, Bill Nelson. (The junior senator, Marco Rubio, who's no fan of "these scientists," will presumably not be joining the party.)

Once a week, when the Senate is in session, Whitehouse gets up and makes a speech about rising sea levels or disappearing lakes or dwindling glaciers. He's kind of the congressional climate-change guy. He's also looking for bipartisan love and feeling lonely. "I've got exactly no Republican colleagues helping me out with this," he said.

There was a time, children, when the parties worked together on climate-change issues. No more. Only 3 percent of current Republican members of Congress have been willing to go on record as accepting the fact that people are causing global warming. That, at least, was the calculation by PolitiFact, which found a grand total of eight Republican nondeniers in the House and Senate. That includes Representative Michael Grimm of New York, who while laudably open-minded on this subject, is also under indictment for perjury and tax fraud. So we may be pushing 2 percent in January.

This is sort of stunning. We're only looking for a simple acknowledgment of basic facts. We'll give a pass to folks who accept the connection between human behavior and climate change, but say they don't want to do anything about it.

Or that China should do something first.

Or: "Who cares? I'm from Detroit!"

In Congress, Republican environmentalists appear to be terrified of what should be the most basic environmental issue possible. Whitehouse blames the Supreme Court's decisions on campaign finance, which gave the energy barons carte blanche when it comes to spending on election campaigns. It's certainly true that there's no way to tick off megadonors like the fabled Koch brothers faster than to suggest the globe is warming.

"At the moment, there's a dogma in the Republican Party about what you can say," Tom Steyer told me. He's the billionaire who formed a "super PAC" to support candidates who acknowledge that climate change exists, that it's caused by human behavior, and that we need to do something major about it.

Steyer has committed to spending about \$100 million this year on ads and organizing in seven states. Many in the campaign-finance-reform community think this is a terrible idea, and that you do not combat the power of right-wing oligarchs to influence American elections by doing the same thing on the left. They have a point. But think of the penguins.

Florida's Republican governor, Rick Scott, who's running for re-election, has been asked many times whether he believes in man-made climate change. Lately, he responds: "I'm not a scientist." Scott is also not a doctor, engineer, computer programmer, personal trainer or a bus driver. Really, it's amazing he even has the confidence to walk into the office in the morning.

The governor did visit last month with some climate scientists. He began the meeting by making it clear that he did not intend to go anywhere near the word *causes*. After the group had pulled out their maps and projections — including the one that shows much of Miami-

Dade County underwater by 2048 — Scott asked them questions. Which were, according to The Miami Herald, “to explain their backgrounds, describe the courses they taught, and where students in their academic fields get jobs.”

If they’re lucky, the students will wind up someplace where there’s no seawater in the garage.

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