'This time': To understand the heatwave in France, we need to step outside the moment

I'm tempted to make a comment about "déjà vu," but I'll hold off for now.

JOHN D. SUTTER
JUN 25, 2026

16 2 1 Share



Swimming in the Seine in August 2025. Photo by John Sutter.

Paris hit 104 degrees Fahrenheit this week.

People are swimming in canals — some 40 of them drowned as they tried to escape the sweltering temperatures, according to the country's prime minister.

Thanks for reading BASELINE! Subscribe for free to receive new posts and support my work.

Subscribed

All of this in a place where only about a quarter of households have AC.

NPR had a recap of the heatwave this morning — mentioning all of the data points above, plus the fact that this is the second heatwave to hit Europe this summer, and it's just June. I was struck, however, not by the (quite harrowing) specifics of this climate disaster but by how much it feels like very many other moments.

NPR's Rebecca Rosman played a statement from a French news anchor, Patrick Cohen: "We'll be talking for a long time about the June 2026 heat wave," Cohen says in the piece, "as a test, a milestone and, perhaps for some, a revelation."

He compared this heatwave to another deadly one in 2003. "This time," he says, "it's impossible to deny the country's climate is changing before our eyes."

This time.

I'm going to quibble with the "this time" of it all.

Because we knew back in 2003 that the connections between heat and climate change — driven primarily by burning fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas — were driving crazy temperatures. That heatwave, which is estimated to have killed several tens of thousands of people, actually birthed the field of "climate attribution" science, in which researchers look for human fingerprints on specific weather events.

From a 2019 piece I wrote for CNN:

> After that disaster [the 2003 heatwave in Europe], scientists for the first time used "climate attribution" techniques to show that human-induced warming very likely *doubled* the risk of that event. It's now possible to see human fingerprints on these catastrophes. Hurricane Harvey in Texas; the 2016 floods in Baton Rouge; Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, which killed an estimated 2,975 people, according to an analysis by George Washington University. Each was linked to – or was shown to have been made worse by – global warming.

I understand the news-y desire to talk about the present moment as if it were unprecedented. The events of France are shocking. They're tragic. They also are part of a longstanding pattern of Earth Amnesia that *has been repeating itself for decades.*

We news folks love a dose of myopia.

But *this time* isn't new.

It's a product of our inability to ditch an addiction to fossil fuels.

And it's an addiction we've had for many decades now.

Thanks for reading BASELINE! Subscribe for free to receive new posts and support my work.

Subscribed

16 Likes · 1 Restack

16 2 1 Share

Discussion about this post

Comments Restacks

Write a comment...

Jen Jasperson Jen Jasperson Jun 25

Human beings are weird. They love drama. Not all, but a lot! I mean, look around. The news catastrophes, as long as it doesn't kill you, or a family member, it fills some kind of craving. My 86-year-old mom is a drama addict, and she was a really good elementary school teacher for 31 years, so not a cigarette-sucking trailer-trash example. She taught kids about the rainforest.

These things lurk in humans. We are not logical or rational. I have studied the environment most of my life, both passively since a child, and actively in my college studies. Yet even I find myself going, "Whoa, look at those flood waters!"

Without a knowledge of all the micro and macro causes, how we are doing this to ourselves, most humans are just stuck in the drama loop. True Crime, maybe. We don't deserve this Earth.

LIKE REPLY SHARE

JMirrer MD JMirrer MD Jun 25

I'm not sure if this is true or not but it seems that regardless of how loud the scientific community is on this subject it is drowned out by denialism and pseudoscience.

This is the societal equivalent of standing at a craps table yelling "my credit's good!" while letting the dice loose to cascade across the table. Eventually we crap out. But losing "the bet" here has more significant consequences.

LIKE REPLY SHARE

Top Latest Discussions

Welcome to "BASELINE"
From John D. Sutter. CNN climate analyst. National Geographic Explorer.
OCT 24, 2019 · JOHN D. SUTTER



Where no one really dies
One of the most wonderful people I've met as a climate journalist died this year. But Shelton Kokeok, like everyone in Shishmaref, lives on through his...
NOV 30, 2025 · JOHN D. SUTTER



'BASELINE' - the TEDx edition
and other scary but non-pandemic things to think about
APR 16, 2020 · JOHN D. SUTTER



Ted Turner as 'Captain Planet'
The 1990s cartoon series, which the CNN founder co-created, taught a entire generation of kids about environmental ethics. I show a global warming ep in...
MAY 6 · JOHN D. SUTTER



5:30p tomorrow | BASELINE at Harvard
Meaning: tomorrow! I'd love to see you there ...
NOV 12, 2019 · JOHN D. SUTTER



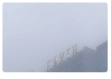
Why we can't lose hope
I have a memento from the Paris climate talks on my desk as a reminder
NOV 9, 2025 · JOHN D. SUTTER



'BASELINE' in Vox, NPR and Kottke
And our new strategy for filming during Covid-19
JUL 20, 2020 · JOHN D. SUTTER



Is this normal?
Muggy in the West. Frigid in the East. It's impossible to intuit what's normal anymore -- or, more importantly, how abnormal things have become. Weather...
DEC 12, 2025 · JOHN D. SUTTER



Skating on puddles in December
A hopefully-smile-inducing postcard from Oklahoma
DEC 28, 2025 · JOHN D. SUTTER

The 1,000-year camera...
...and other ways to fight chronic 'short-termism'
DEC 3, 2019 · JOHN D. SUTTER



See all >

© 2026 John D. Sutter · Privacy · Terms · Collection notice

Start your Substack Get the app

Substack is the home for great culture