

Something scarier than war and terrorism: No more winter

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To: President George Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

I live in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Yesterday our trees were full of robins eating juniper berries. I've lived in Michigan all of my life, and have never heard of a robin eating anything other than grubs or worms (and, perhaps, the occasional ripe cherry), and never seen a robin in early February.

Our winter almost didn't come this year: between October and mid-January, our temperatures rarely dipped below 40 degrees, hovering mostly between 50s and 60s - that's May weather here, shirt-sleeves weather. We had gnats and mosquitos in December. Then, in mid-January, the freeze snapped shut like a leg-hold trap, and we've since had weeks of single-digit cold, mornings so frigid that school is canceled because the buses won't start (also unprecedented in Michigan). Until February it never got cold enough for the ground to freeze, and so the robins never migrated. Now it's too late for them to leave, and they are starving and freezing.

Roughly 1,800 years ago, midway through the first millennium, there was a worldwide temperature drop of a bit more than two degrees. This caused the failure of Egyptian wheat crops. At the time Egypt was controlled by Rome, who relied on the ample harvest. Rome was a city of more than a million people, requiring 300,000 tons of grain per year to keep the citizens fed. Assuring an ample bread supply was a major hot-button political issue. Since the failed harvests meant no vast wheat surplus from within their empire, the Roman government needed to buy foreign grain. This caused a budget shortfall, and Rome was no longer able to afford their enormous army. Without consistent military protection, the fringes of the empire began to fray; barbarians succeeded more and more often in their looting raids, destabilizing the Roman hinterlands. Ultimately, Rome collapsed and the Dark Ages began, all because of a two-degree temperature drop.

Since I was born the mean worldwide temperature has risen about one degree, and is projected to rise another seven or eight during my infant son's lifetime - a precipitous, unprecedented climate shift. What does this mean? What will it mean?

My son is 9 months old, and our little family works to keep our carbon footprint small: we

drive a hybrid, bike and walk whenever possible, buy our meat and produce locally whenever we can. All of our bulbs are fluorescent. We've blown in as much insulation as will fit in our attic, removed our old basement windows in favor of insulating glass blocks, and replaced our major appliances with Energy Star and high-efficiency models. We use cloth diapers, washing them ourselves in our high-efficiency washer. Most of what we own is recycled, reused or hand-me-down.

Still, by the time my son is my age - and certainly by the time he's yours - Michigan will have no winter.

This absolutely terrifies me. It terrifies me more than war, more than our growing domestic poverty, more than terrorism. I'm a registered voter, a participant in our democracy, and I want to know what you are doing about this now, today. Please contact me at your earliest convenience.

All best,

David Erik Nelson

To contribute essays to Other Voices, contact Mary Morgan, opinion editor, at 734-994-6605 or mmorgan@annarbornews.com.