

## ► DirecTalk



David Dyjack, DrPH, CIH

# Manasota Beach

A cool, crisp September sunrise enveloped me as I ambled from the hotel lobby into the outdoor seating area, patiently waiting for the van to arrive. I was enroute to the Reno, Nevada, airport as I pondered the quote, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes,” attributed, perhaps erroneously, to Mark Twain. Places and people I know and love—Puerto Rico, Nova Scotia, the Florida Gulf region, and coastal Georgia—have been hammered by our archenemies, Hurricanes Fiona and Ian. While I have not visited Alaska, I feel for those affected by Typhoon Merbok, which devastated significant portions of the Bering Sea coast.

Various National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) staff and board members—including myself, Heather Folker, our member services and credentialing director, and Tim Hatch, Region 7 vice-president—have reached out to our colleagues throughout North America as a token of support and reassurance, though in reality there is little we can do to assist. Seems each year it is the same. The names change but the conditions do not, including droughts, fires, and hurricanes. Furthermore, each year is perceptibly more severe than the last.

As the plane departed Reno for Denver, I reminisced about an effort I undertook 1 year ago. NEHA employees Maddie Gustafson and Rosie DeVito requested I record a video on my perceptions of climate change as part of a collaborative effort with ecoAmerica. I proceeded to record several vignettes in various parts of the country: Ann Arbor, Michigan; Lyme, Connecticut; Cobb Island,

*Our country’s infrastructure was built for a different era and a different climate.*

Maryland; Denver, Colorado; and Manasota Beach, Florida. The individual 90-s videos captured how climate change was affecting each locale and the health, safety, and financial security of the local population. The Manasota Beach location is in Sarasota County and was one of those impacted by Hurricane Ian. In that video I describe how the area is affected by red tides, rising sea levels, and the risk of extreme weather events. Prescient.

I also made a roadside visit to Lyme, a quaint town that was a short drive from the location of the 2021 Yankee Conference. Lyme disease in the U.S. historically was limited to New England and a portion of the upper Midwest. The U.S. government is confident the range of the vector, the deer tick, is rapidly expanding because of climate change. There are reports that the tick is migrating northward into Canada at a clip of 46 km per year. The active season for disease transmission could be extended by 1 to 3 weeks per year because of the warming climate.

Ann Arbor, hometown of my alma mater the University of Michigan and our friends at NSF, made for an interesting pit stop. I recorded a video at the sewage treatment plant on the Huron River, where a couple months earlier, a historic amount of rain fell on June 25, 2021. The result was 10 billion gallons of untreated sewage being diverted into surface waters throughout the state. Our country’s infrastructure was built for a different era and a different climate.

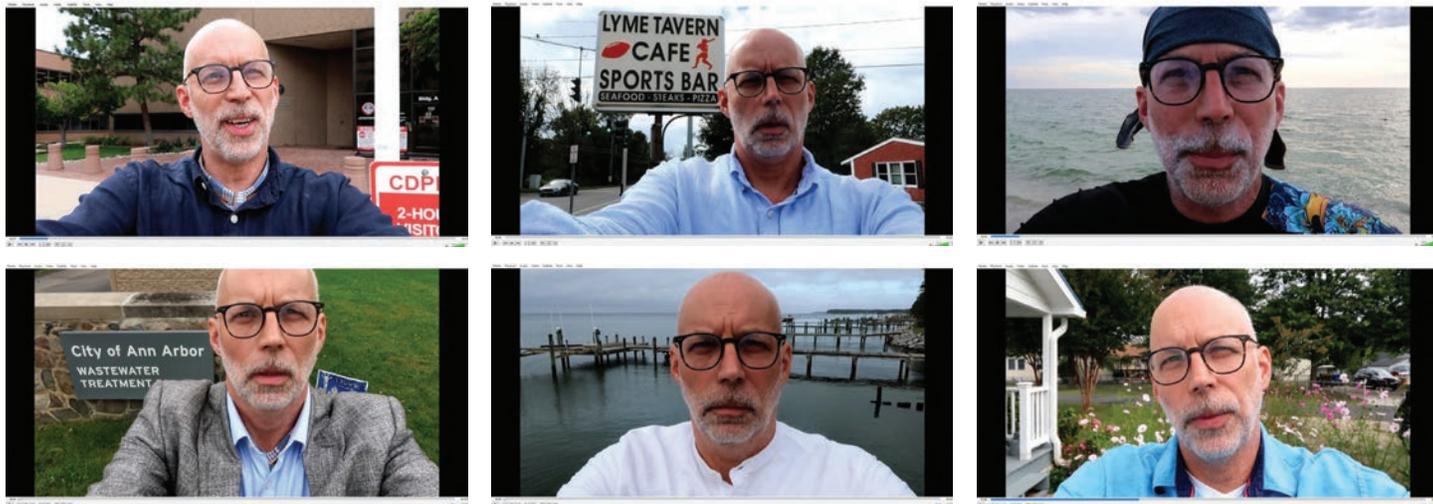
I planted myself outside the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment in Denver for a Rocky Mountain video. Wildfires in the western U.S. have contributed to some of Denver’s air pollution woes leading to some of the unhealthiest air in the country and world on some days. Yes, the world—worse than Deli and Beijing. The worst wildfires typically occur in the months of June to September with particulate sources travelling from as far away as Oregon and California.

The first and last stop on my journey was Cobb Island, the place I call home. The 11,600-mi coastline of the Chesapeake Bay makes my home region a natural and cultural treasure. The Bay is also our nation’s largest estuary and provides over \$100 billion in annual economic value. Sadly, the Chesapeake is uniquely vulnerable to the effects of sea level rise, with the sea level rising at twice the average global rate. People like me, who cherish witnessing the migration of ospreys, bald eagles, geese, purple martins, dolphins, and rockfish, will be displaced as our homes are a mere 3 ft above sea level.

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On location with my climate change videos. Images courtesy of David Dyjack.

Each of my attempts at vlogging about climate and health produced hilariously poor videos. I underestimated the skill it takes to act natural and speak extemporaneously while holding a camera and trying to be impressive. Better leave these endeavors to people with talent. Having said that, I was struck by the stories I discovered. I was struck by the implications of climate change at the local level. I was struck by the challenges we face as a society.

I am energized by the notion that it is time for a holistic, integrated approach to climate and health. The breadth and depth of the challenge can seem daunting. I am pleased that the federal government has at last provided leadership in the alternative energy

conversation with investments in nonfossil fuel energy sources. But like the profoundly local stories I discovered in my journey across the U.S., there is more to this saga.

Much of the new energy production and storage capacity will require the mining of rare earths and other metals. That means searching out and securing new sources of nickel, cobalt, and lithium. That also means doing business in nefarious places like the Congo, where environmental injustices are abundant. We need to enter this new era with our eyes wide in our zeal to secure clean, renewable energy. I feel the environmental health professional has a unique and valuable perspective on these emerging ethical and technical dilemmas. It is time for us

to collaborate with the federal government to develop a partnership for a new generation of environmental health practitioners. A generation with new aptitudes, new skills, and new approaches to the challenges of their generation.

President Thomas Jefferson once quipped, “The care of human life and happiness, and not their destruction, is the first and only object of good government.” Well said, President Jefferson, well said. Let us renew our journey with vigor in 2023.

Many blessings for the holiday season. ✨

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