

An usual event occurred recently: One of the general-interest law professor blogs posted something about environmental law. [In that post the following point of view about climate change was developed:](#)

We may well be causing climate change, but it's not clear there's anything we as individuals or we as a country are really equipped to do about it. So much of the damage is already done, and so much of the future damage will be caused by activities that the United States government can't control, that no useful policy proposals that are plausible- or even conceivable given our current political institutions. Thus, the science of climate change really isn't relevant to any important decisions, or even any important political activism, until scientific solutions or political institutions radically change. We can just ignore it.

The author added: "Now, I am not certain this view is correct. I am not even certain that I hold this view (although I am sympathetic to it). But I've heard it articulated by at least one smart law professor, and I've got to assume that he's not the only one."

There is a simple rebuttal to this point of view, and it's one that probably comes almost immediately to most environmental law professors: adaptation. In other words, even if you think we can't do **anything** at all to reduce the extent of future climate change, we still need to adapt to that climate change. And climate change science ideally can tell us a lot about how much climate change will occur, how that change might impact particular resources, and how it might be distributed in space and time.

But I don't mean to pick on this one particular law professor. This is a more general problem, at least in the broader public discourse about climate change. Why do people keep forgetting about adaptation? I think the problem is that each of the various "points of view" has reasons to downplay it.

First, people who want to fight/stop/reduce climate change are concerned that talking too much about adaptation will undermine their efforts to fight/stop/reduce climate change. Adaptation is defeatist talk. Or maybe it's talk that will let people get psychologically used to change, and therefore willing to accept it and not stop it. I think this resistance has diminished over time, as the inevitability of significant climate change (no matter what we do, short of major geo-engineering) sinks in.

Second, people who don't want to fight/stop/reduce climate change also don't want to

discuss adaptation. That might be because they deny the possibility of climate change, so what is there to adapt to? For others, who might do believe climate change is occurring, but believe that attempting to fight/stop/reduce it is undesirable or unwise (or dangerous to their own personal interests), recognizing adaptation can undermine the force of their arguments. Once you start talking about adaptation, it's possible that you might realize that adaptation will require lots of investments, lots of costs, lots of difficult transitions. Suddenly, fighting/stopping/reducing climate change doesn't look so terrible anymore.

There are, of course, plenty of smart people who do understand the importance of adaptation, and in fact believe that [adaptation is a better strategy than trying to do a no-holds-barred fight to reduce carbon emissions](#). That's a reasonable position (though one I think is wrong on the merits, though that's a topic for another post). But it's striking how often that position is not present in the political debate on the topic. And that's unfortunate. It would be a much more productive conversation if it was one about the relative mix of adaptation versus control of emissions. A much more realistic one too.