

QUESTION:

If Alaska is “ground zero” for global warming, why are this summer’s temperatures so chilly?

ANSWER:

Several factors help explain why the recent unseasonably cool weather does NOT mean that global warming has halted:

1. Scientists say recent cool Alaskan temperatures are related to La Niña.

La Niñas occur periodically when a cool band of water (more than 0.5-degrees C below average) spreads along the equator in the Pacific Ocean. The recent La Niña has had a substantial cooling impact on temperatures in Anchorage, the Kenai Peninsula, and on many other parts of Alaska. According to Ecologist Ed Berg of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, “It has been a long winter and a late spring in Alaska... Basically, we are coming off a 10-month La Niña and a classic La Niña winter... which affects the whole Pacific basin including Alaska.” In short: Cold water in the Pacific from a La Niña means cool, wet weather in Alaska. Another cyclical pattern of lower ocean temperatures, the Pacific Decadal Oscillation, has also been cited as a contributing factor to Alaskan weather this summer.

2. Worldwide temperatures are continuing their rapidly ascending trend.

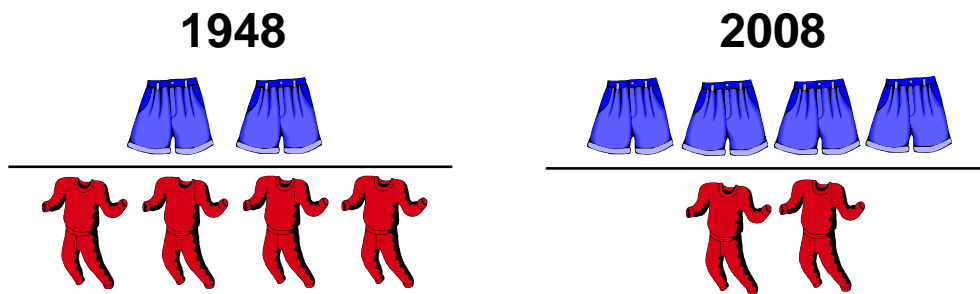
While La Niña has cooled Alaska, the world as a whole continues to undergo warmer temperatures. According to the National Climatic Data Center of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the combined average global land and ocean surface temperatures for both May and June 2008 ranked eighth warmest for those months since worldwide records began in 1880. Moreover, globally this year witnessed the ninth warmest January-June period ever. So, while Alaska has been cool due to area-specific cyclical conditions, the world overall continues to experience higher temperatures consistent with global warming.

3. It’s important to distinguish between weather and climate.

Weather is a short-term phenomenon. The term refers to the state of the atmosphere on a particular day or series of days in a particular place. Weather includes such factors as temperature, cloudiness, moisture, wind and barometric pressure.

Climate is a long-term phenomenon. The term refers to the composite or generally prevailing weather conditions of a region, throughout the year, averaged over a series of years.

Charles Wohlforth, author of *The Whale and the Supercomputer* (an Alaskan adventure story about climate change), explains the difference this way: “Choosing shorts or long underwear on a particular day is about weather; the ratio of shorts to long underwear in the drawer is about climate.”



In other words, half a century ago – when the climate was cooler – there were many more days each year when people wore long johns; today – when the climate is warmer – we wear short pants much more often than our grandparents did.

4. The already overwhelming scientific evidence that global warming is unequivocal continues to mount.

Throughout the world, the impacts from global warming, and the evidence concerning its causes, continue to become more dramatic and compelling. To cite just one example involving Alaska: According to the National Snow and Ice Data Center, Arctic sea ice extent in mid-July 2008 was below the 1979-2000 average by 1 million square kilometers.

BOTTOM LINE:

Despite a cool summer in Alaska, global warming remains, as Red Cross Secretary-General Markku Niskala has phrased it, “one of the greatest threats facing humanity today.”

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is the most significant greenhouse gas pollutant, and the major cause of global warming. The most recent data from NOAA indicate that humans have increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by more than 37% since the Industrial Revolution. There is now more carbon dioxide (384 ppm) in the atmosphere than at any time in measurable history: 800,000 years.

For economic, political, moral, health, cultural, ecological and global stability reasons, America must lead the world on climate change issues. And, the good news is that addressing global warming will create jobs, strengthen our national security, improve our health, and position the US more competitively in the world economy.

For more information or to learn what you can do to help, please visit alaskaconservationsolutions.com.