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When Will the Southwest Become Unlivable?

Air-conditioning and swimming pools are sustaining my community. I worry about the day when they won't be enough.

By Ruxandra Guidi



Juan Arredondo / The New York Times / Redux
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In the desert, summer starts in earnest in May. It’s the beginning of dry season, with highs in the 90s—just a taste of the triple-digit days to come. Some people still venture out to trails and campsites, but for me, May marks the end of hiking season and the beginning of pool season. Every day since May 1, I’ve been heading out for a swim at the University of Arizona recreation center, in Tucson, where I can watch the

mourning doves and hawks crisscrossing the sky above me while I'm doing the backstroke.

Four years ago, when my family was preparing to move to Tucson, I briefly fantasized about finding a home with a pool. Many small, middle-class houses in the city have them: cement holes in the ground flanked by even more cement. But my partner and I decided a backyard pool would use too much water in the desert, so instead, the university pool has become my lifeline.

Swimming is more than exercise. It's meditation, an escape from stress. In the desert, it can also be a necessity as summer temperatures rise and rise. Locals like to say that a couple of decades ago, we could count on finding respite from the heat: the occasional 90-degree high instead of 100, and cool nights to break up the sweltering days. But now the heat waves are ever present, and we must find refuge. Clouds and tree cover are rare, so our comfort and survival depend on man-made environments: movie theaters, museums, our air-conditioned homes, the pool.

This has always been a land of little rain and warm summers. But over the past two decades, chronic drought and heat have gotten steadily worse. This summer, a heat dome has parked over the Southwest; highs in Phoenix have hit 110 degrees for nearly two weeks straight. Arizona may be breaking records, but the trend is worldwide: On July 3, the average global temperature reached 62.62 degrees Fahrenheit, the highest recorded since 1979. The next day was even hotter.

Each year, an average of 702 heat-related deaths occur in the United States. Young children, older adults, and outdoor workers are among the most vulnerable. My family takes those deaths very seriously. We moved here in July 2019, and I decided I couldn't wait until fall to go on a hike, so we went. To this day, I remember the surge of anxiety I felt when I realized I'd taken us deep into a trail in the middle of the day; there were no shade trees nearby, and our water was dwindling fast. Never again.

[Read: Heat is the human-rights issue of the 21st century.](https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2023/07/heat-dome-southwest-arizona/674689/)

Those who have the means to adapt, do. Air-conditioning is absolutely necessary in Arizona. The summer we arrived, ours broke, and we found ourselves in the middle of a heat wave waiting a week to get it replaced because demand was so high. Our next-door neighbor lent us her swamp cooler—a device that cools air by evaporating water, and that many mobile-home residents depend on. Still, the sweltering temperatures kept us up at night that week.

Besides museums and pools, families take their kids to indoor gyms. The supermarket is a favorite place to hide from the heat. The city is running 20 free public pools this summer; businesses set up misters and umbrellas; there are new *raspados* (Mexican shaved-ice joints) popping up all over town. My neighborhood fire station has a big handwritten sign up front that I pass every time I go for a swim. Find shelter from the heat, it reads. All are welcome. The firehouse is one of several informal sites across the city; there are also six official ones. They're what you'd imagine: big, air-conditioned rooms with places to sit, where water is readily available. For many older adults and houseless people, they can spell the difference between lethargy and vigor, or between life and death.

When I talk with friends in more temperate climates, many wonder how I could love living in the Sonoran Desert. I tell them that it's because this place has humbled me like nowhere else has, bringing me close to nature, to a slower and more sustainable pace of life. Here in Tucson, I've met more people who are actively working on homegrown solutions to the climate crisis than I have in much bigger, better-resourced cities. Faced with unending heat, Tucsonans teach one another how to harvest rain, and advocate for bike-friendly infrastructure.

I think it's no coincidence that my fondness for desert life has grown at the same time that my adopted state has been forced to deal with more severe and frequent spells of extreme temperatures. The precarity of this life is exactly why I am so attached to it.

[Read: America is going to have a 'Heat Belt'](#)

Millions and millions of Americans love the southwestern lifestyle. According to the latest census, Phoenix is now the fastest growing of all large American cities; its metro area recently surpassed 5 million people. Las Vegas, another water-strapped desert city, is growing disproportionately too.

Every new person who arrives is opting in to something beautiful—and every new person who arrives puts more strain on our limited refuges from the heat. I don't know when it will happen, but I worry about the day when the Sonoran Desert—and the wider Southwest—becomes unlivable because we won't have enough ways to keep cool. The escapes we have now may be available only to people in certain neighborhoods, likely those behind gates, with higher average incomes. Arizona is already limiting new construction around Phoenix for lack of groundwater.

In the next 30 years, according to an analysis by the climate nonprofit First Street Foundation, much of the U.S. could experience temperatures that the National Weather Service puts in its “extreme danger” category. Currently, about 8 million people are facing temperatures higher than 125 degrees Fahrenheit for days on end; by 2053, an estimated 107 million people will. Not all of them will be living in the Southwest, but the region will suffer. Climate experts are reluctant to say whether this summer's extremes will become the norm, but they do predict that our region will keep breaking records.

And yet, despite these odds, people keep moving here. Maybe it's because we don't think of these extreme temperatures as a natural disaster. The change is happening gradually, albeit fast, year after year. Our bodies, so reliant on air-conditioning and pools, seem to be able to adjust, and come fall, our minds have a way of forgetting what a toll the heat took on us.

[Read: Summer in the South is becoming unbearable](#)

Lately, I have been pondering all of this during my daily swims. I think about the privilege I have to be able to use a pool regularly, to move my body in the water, to be

outside as temperatures keep rising. I imagine what not having access to any of that might feel like. And I wonder at what point a pool might be the last thing that sustains us here. What happens then? We can't just stay in the water 24 hours a day.

When my mind goes to those difficult places, I'm prone to magical thinking. I tell myself that those of us who love the desert will figure things out together. The local government will step in. We still have time. And then, as I keep myself afloat and look up at the azure sky, I think about fall and winter, those cooler months that will take me back outdoors to the very reasons I love this place so much. To the reasons I want to stay.

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