SPRINGS

THE RACHEL CARSON CENTER REVIEW

Issue #7 | 2025

May

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THE UNBEARABLE WEIGHT OF DISPLACED WEATHER

Mike Hulme

Springs

The Rachel Carson Center Review

7 • 2025

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"Taking the Weather with You"

In 1992, the Australian-New Zealand rock band Crowded House released their successful single "Weather with You." The song reached the Top 50 charts in 10 countries, including in the United Kingdom where it got to number seven. The refrain goes,

> Everywhere you go, you always take the weather
>
> Everywhere you go, you always take the weather[1]

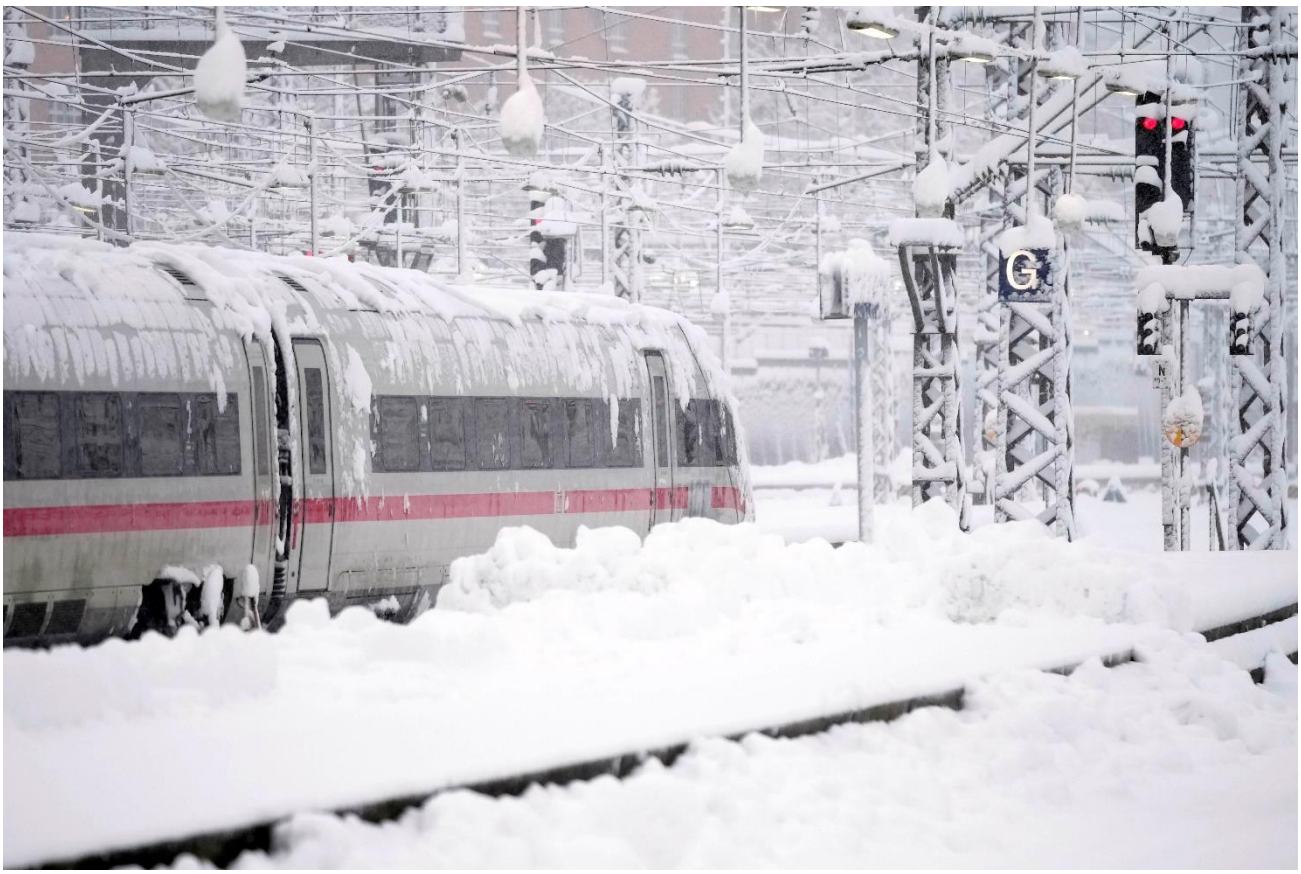

Fig. 1. A train is parked at the central station after heavy snowfall in Munich, Germany, Saturday, 2 December 2023. © picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Matthias Schrader. All rights reserved.

These words, written by lead singer Neil Finn, are an apt description of the ways in which many people of the twenty-first century now experience the weather. Through apps, webcams, and other forms of digital mediation, the weather is always with us. Yet, more significantly, it is not just "our" weather that we carry with us; we now have continual access to other people's weather too. The experience of weather, especially extreme weather, is becoming increasingly cosmopolitan. The weather we encounter in our daily lives is losing the immediacy of its place-based character. As we observe weather beyond borders, we become voyeurs of other people's weather misfortunes, and I believe the psychological effects of this phenomenon are profound.

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-15145

An Abundance of Weather

Decades of scientific research have made clear that human presence on the planet is changing the world's climates. Making them warmer on average, yes. But climate and weather are not the same thing, so as climates warm, the thermodynamics of regional weather and ocean systems are also changing. This means that some of the characteristics of local weather—heat, storm, rain, ice—are changing in frequency or severity. Yet it is not only the *physical* weather of the atmosphere that is in flux. The way that many people now *experience* the weather is also changing.

This change is for several reasons.[2] One is because of increased physical mobility. The world has become smaller as air travel has become more widely accessible. Many of us now experience multiple climates within a single year. We are no longer bound to the weather of one locality or several adjacent localities. For example, the English public may encounter Mediterranean climates on summer holiday, the climates of the Gulf States whilst supporting the England football team, or the climates of eastern Europe during a weekend stag party. This is not a wholly new phenomenon, of course, although now much less the preserve of the affluent or the migrant.

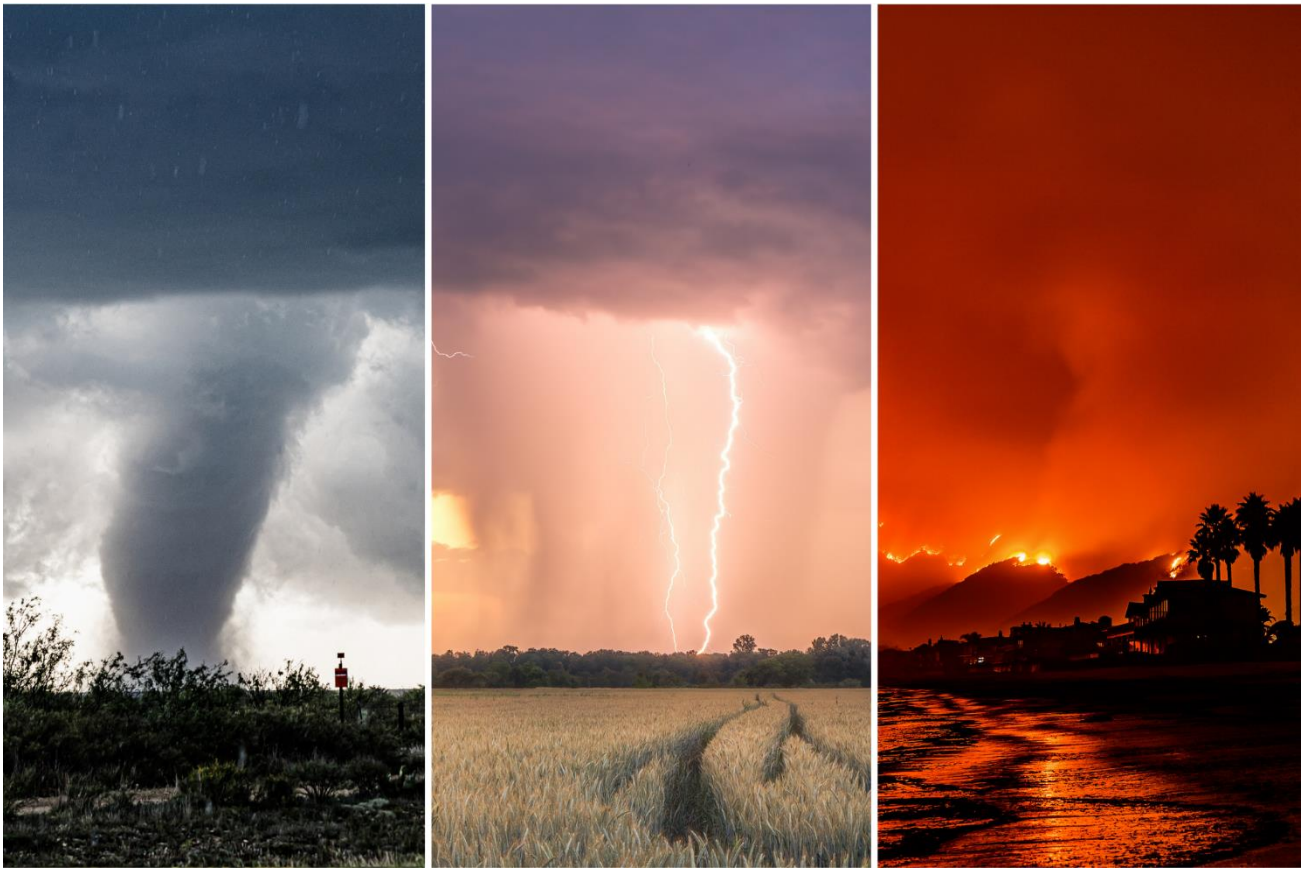

Fig. 2. (Left) Tornado in southwest Texas. © Wirestock on iStock. All rights reserved. (Centre) Summer thunderstorm near Rastatt Plittersdorf, Germany. © Markus Semmler on iStock. All rights reserved. (Right) Thomas Fire, December 2017, seen from a beach in Santa Barbara. © Carsten Schertzer on iStock. All rights reserved.

And our experience of weather has recently become more cosmopolitan through other ubiquitous technologies. It is now possible to experience the many varieties and extremes of weather on offer around the world vicariously and instantly through webcams, phones, and other digital media. We are increasingly obsessed with weather records, as evidenced for example in *The Financial Times*' Climate Tracker, an online platform that "keeps watch on extreme events around the world," tracking temperature rises and other extreme and record-breaking weather events.[3] Through our screens we encounter violent weather, we follow storm chasers and imagine for ourselves what it may be like

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to be buffeted by hurricane-force winds. And through webcams, we can track the changing weather conditions at the extremities of the world—at the poles, on mountain tops, in tropical islands—or in those distant familiar places—where our relatives live, where we holidayed last year, where our neighbour has emigrated to. The threatening weather hazards of the world are all available for us to view: drought in Somalia, torrential rain in Spain, extreme heat in India, violent storms in the Philippines. This is a new experience for us. As we see all types of weather extremes through digital media, so too do we "feel"—we bear the weight of—all of the world's wild weather in synchronised time.

Timothy Morton deduces from such evidence that phenomena such as global warming should be thought of as "hyperobjects"—objects that are "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans." Global warming exists in no specific location, and it transcends our familiar temporal horizons. Morton asserts optimistically that, as we glimpse such hyperobjects through an abundance of digital and visual data, they "compel us to think ecologically."[4] Of course it is possible, conversely, that "thinking ecologically" is what attunes us to recognise hyperobjects rather than them imposing themselves on us; in other words, believing is seeing rather than seeing is believing. Yet however we might explain our changing sense of a climate in flux, what is not in doubt is that the world's weather in all its most extreme manifestations is now accessible to (nearly) all of us, all the time. As Crowded House sang in 1992, we do indeed "take the weather with us."

The Displacement of Weather

What does this weather overload do to us? In some of my earlier work I observed this excess of weather and associated it with Ulrich Beck's idea of "banal cosmopolitanism."[5] For Beck, this term captures the mundane discourses that enact globalisation in the everyday, the flattening of diversity and the eradication of difference in a borderless world. As he describes in relation to cuisine, "The result . . . is a banal cosmopolitan culinary eclecticism." For Beck, "world society has taken possession of our kitchens and [the world's food] is boiling and sizzling in our pans."[6] I had concluded back then, more than a decade ago, and in line with Morton's optimistic prognosis, that the move towards borderless weather might enhance social and ecological solidarity. That it might develop into a more conscious and responsible sense of the global.[7] But now I'm not so sure.

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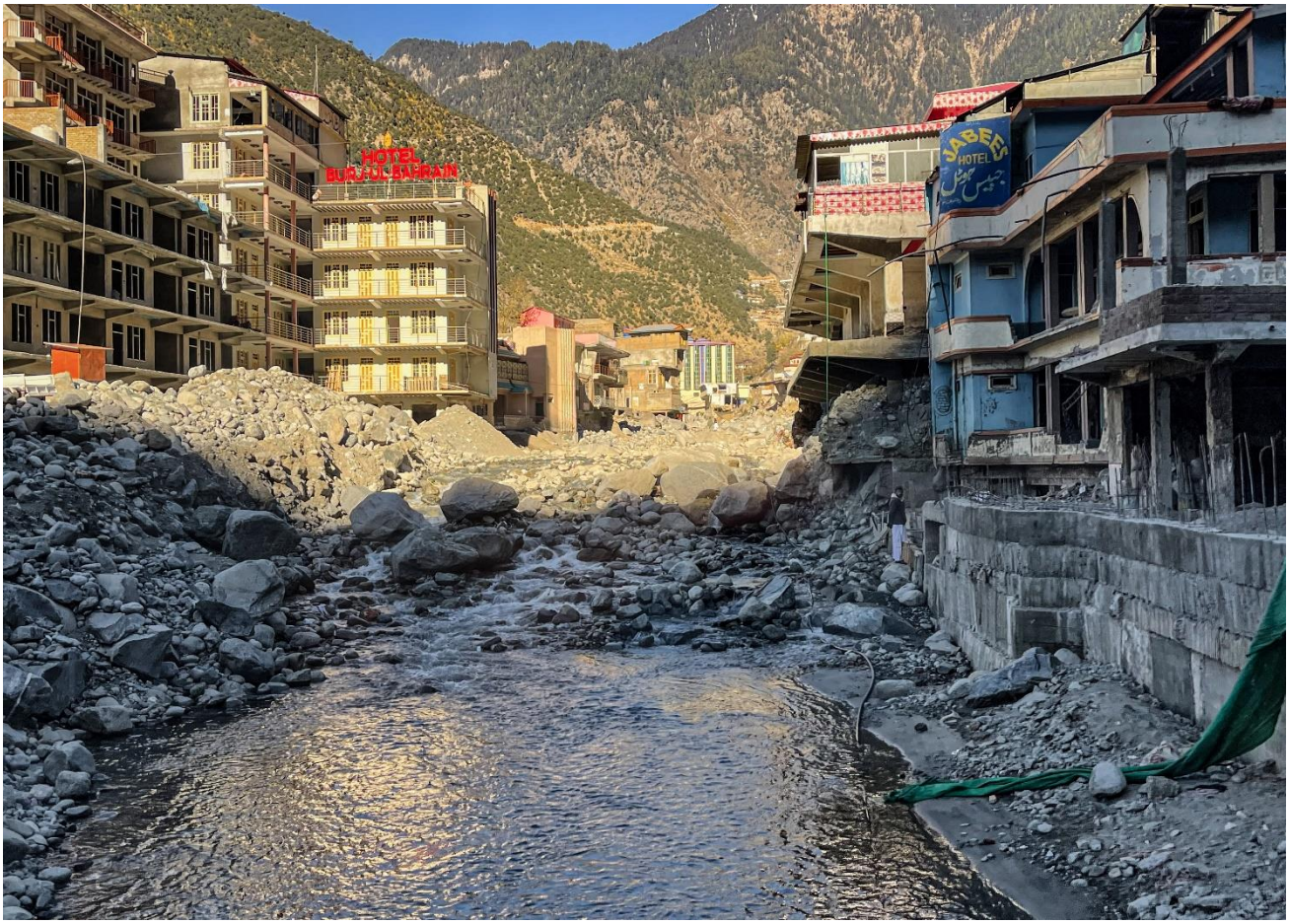

Fig. 3. Damaged road and buildings in Bahrain, Pakistan, October 2022, in the aftermath of severe flooding. © Anita Schneider on iStock. All rights reserved.

Rather than enhancing solidarity or transferring our sense of place attachment from the local to the global, I fear this surfeit of weather may be doing something quite different. In her 2004 bestseller book *Watching the English*, anthropologist Kate Fox observes the function of weather talk in English culture.[8] For Fox, such talk is a form of social grooming, a way of recognising, greeting, and identifying with "the other"—the near neighbour or cohabitant—through a shared quotidian experience of the weather in place. This primacy of the shared immediacy and intimacy of our own emplaced weather is lost as we experience the weather of ever more distant and numerous places. Our weather talk is of the drought in Somalia or the violent storm in the Philippines and less of the daily shared weather we encounter in our own place. We transpose someone else's extreme weather into our own. This virtual displacing of weather undermines what Fox sees as the ritualistic function of weather talk and dilutes the one circumstance of daily life we share with nearby others. Our virtual worlds overwhelm us with other people's weather, and so we find it harder to cultivate an intuitive shared sense of what the weather in "our locality" should be.

The Unbearable Weight of the World's Weather[9]

Crowded House member Neil Finn wrote another song about the weather, titled "Four Seasons in One Day," also released in 1992. The song was written in his flat in St. Kilda East, a suburb of Melbourne, and he explained in a later interview:

> "Four Seasons in One Day" was a common Melbourne phrase, coz you go from a blazing hot, sunny day to raining and then it'd be hailing that night. [My brother Tim] and I were riding in emotional roller coasters

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> a lot of the time and there was a lot of angst around that period. So it was a good description of the many moods of us, collectively and individually.[10]

The Finn brothers sought to express their moods by describing the changeable weather of Melbourne. For many of us today, rather than the weather reflecting our moods, the increasing weight of weather we bear becomes their cause. We find ourselves psychologically burdened by bearing the weight, moment by moment, of *all* the world's seasons, not just Melbourne's.

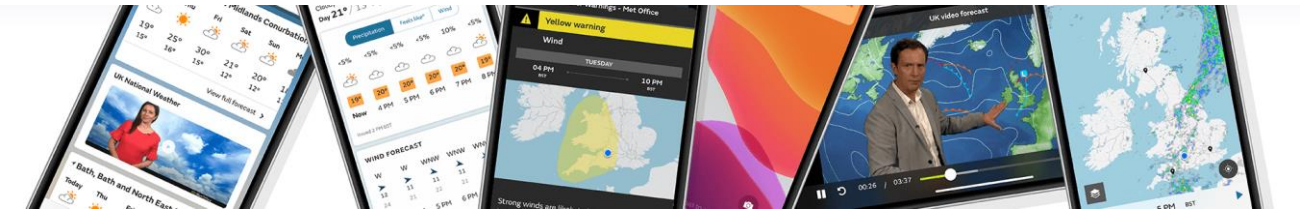

Fig. 4. © Met Office. All rights reserved.

Fig. 5. Poster from a public EU climate-change campaign from 2006 to encourage people to adapt their behaviours in order to "control climate change." "You Control Climate Change," European Commission, 2006, https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2012ad2a-0fa7-11e8-966a-01aa75ed71a1. © 2007 European Union. All rights reserved.

With weather displaced, what we now experience vicariously has become imaginatively "heavy" to us. It becomes unbearable, it makes us anxious. Let me explain why. The processes I describe above mean that we increasingly experience weather as virtual, vicarious, and sensational, rather than as real, embodied, and sensual. We become disoriented through this surfeit of unfamiliar weather. Other people's weather appears threatening to us since it is detached from the well-founded rhythms and anchors of our everyday routines. We increasingly sense that weather is "out of place," and in a virtual sense it is. We begin to question whether the idea of "regular" or "normal" weather—which is the very essence of the idea of a natural climate—any longer has meaning. As historian of science Lorraine Daston explains in her essay exploring the boundaries of nature, "without well-founded expectations, the world of causes and promises falls apart."[11] The experience of a world without the ordering and stabilising power of the idea of "a climate"—an atmosphere without reliable causes and promises—becomes unbearable.

This virtual displacement of weather amplifies our sense of how much and how rapidly the world's climates may be changing. It provokes neologisms such as "weather weirding" and "weather scrambling." The stabilising psychological power of our idea of "a climate"—that the weather is contained within certain familiar boundaries, the idea that puts weather "in its place" so to speak—is weakened. We all feel less secure and more anxious.[12]

This displacing of weather is also unsettling because it challenges another instinct of our humanity, intensified by modernity, which is to seek control (see figure 5). We desire to control, or at least to manage, the inconvenient discomforts of our immediate

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experiences of weather by implementing technologies of climate control in our cars, homes, offices, cafes, patios. But our vicarious encounters with the weight of the world's weather undermine this modernist project of control. If I live in Munich, I can do nothing to accommodate myself to India's heat; if I live in Nairobi, I can do nothing to escape Spain's floods. This begins to explain the growing attraction of inventing new, last-resort technologies of climate control, whether marine cloud brightening or solar geoengineering. It seems to us that only megalomaniac schemes such as these could possibly operate at the scale commensurate with the unbearable weight of our weather anxieties.

Notes

[1] "Weather with You," Neil Finn's official website, accessed 7 March 2025, https://www.neilfinn.com/weather-with-you.

[2] Mike Hulme, "Cosmopolitan Climates: Hybridity, Foresight and Meaning," *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 2–3 (2010): 267–76, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409358730.

[3] "Climate Tracker: Keeping Watch on Extreme Events Around the World," *Financial Times*, 13 December 2024, https://on.ft.com/3ZsMatC.

[4] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1, 48.

[5] Mike Hulme, "Interview with Mike Hulme on Climate Change and Consumption," interview by Souvik Mukherjee and Josi Paz, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 10 February 2011, https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/blog/interview-with-mike-hulme-on-climate-change-and-consumption; also see Hulme, "Cosmopolitan Climates."

[6] Ulrich Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Society and Its Enemies," *Theory, Culture & Society* 19, no. 1–2 (2002): 17–44, 28.

[7] This is along the lines explored by Ursula Heise in her 2008 book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*: Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford University Press, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195335637.001.0001.

[8] Kate Fox, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (Hodder, 2004).

[9] I derive the idea of "unbearable weight" from Milan Kundera's 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera describes the life of his central character in the book as "a lightness of being," a life so lacking in commitments or moral responsibility to anyone or anything else that it becomes "unbearable" for the woman concerned. From this, I develop the idea that the detachment of our experience of weather from the situatedness of everyday life imposes not a lightness on us, but a "weight," one that becomes unbearable.

[10] Quoted in John O'Donnell, Toby Creswell, and Craig Mathieson, *The 100 Best Australian Albums* (Hardie Grant Publishing, 2011).

[11] Lorraine Daston, "The World in Order," in *Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology*, ed. David Albertson and Cabell King (Fordham University Press, 2010), 15–34, 32, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823293568-003.

[12] See Mike Hulme, "Climate and Its Changes: A Cultural Appraisal," *GEO: Geography and Environment* 2, no. 1 (2015): 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1002/geo2.5.

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-15145

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Cite this article

Hulme, Mike. "The Unbearable Weight of Displaced Weather." *Springs: The Rachel Carson Center Review*, no. 7 (May 2025). https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc-springs-15145.

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ISSN 2751-9317

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