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Plants may be wising up faster than humans to the dangers of global warming

Vegetation is adapting to soak up more CO2 and use less water.

CHRISTIAN COTRONEO

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When it comes to dealing with climate change, plants seem to be picking up more responsibilities than humans. (Photo: ESOlex/Shutterstock)

Plants may be doing their part to fight climate change.

According to a study published in the science journal Nature Communications, land-based vegetation has boosted its carbon dioxide absorption by 17 percent compared to 30 years ago. Even more astonishing, the study notes, these land plants are using less water to do so.

In other words, as the planet's CO2 levels rise, plants are soaking up more of it — and doing it significantly more efficiently.

"We found that rising CO2 levels are causing the world's plants to become more water-wise, almost everywhere, whether in dry places or wet ones," the Australian scientists noted.

It's almost as if the world's vegetation got together in Paris and signed an accord pledging to ... oh wait, that was supposed to be our end of the deal.

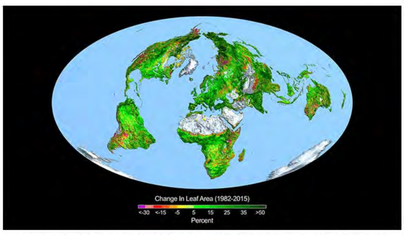
In any case, our greenest global citizens appear to be picking up some of our slack. And it couldn't come at a more crucial time. Since the 1950s, greenhouse gases — carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide — have been rising relentlessly.



The humans did it. (Photo: Lee Yiu Tung/Shutterstock)

Human activity, notably our penchant for burning oil, gas, coal and wood, has been fingered as the chief culprit, warming the planet to alarming levels.

From space, it's hard to see a problem. In fact, NASA has noted a significant greening effect across the planet over the last 35 years. The CO2 surge has spurred unprecedented growth in plants, as well as trees and leaves. In fact, the space agency estimates the greening effect is about twice the size of the continental United States.



An image showing the change in leaf area across the planet between 1982 and 2015. (Photo: University of Boston/NASA)

The trouble is, all that CO2 clings to heat, keeping it from dispersing beyond our atmosphere. And canned heat, as you can imagine, only gets hotter.

Here on the ground, we're seeing the wages of that steady upward tick — from the breakup of a massive Antarctic ice sheet to mass coral dead zones to the profound impact on animals like the iconic polar bear.



The polar bear has become emblematic of the toll of climate change. (Photo: Alexey Seafarer/Shutterstock)

Plants doing more with less

Plants, at least, have wised up to this pressing modern reality. While land-based vegetation needs water to grow, they've reduced their intake to a sip, according to the new study.

But most critically, plants seem to be doing much more with less. And by more, we mean, more to help us — specifically, by soaking up more carbon dioxide from our atmosphere.

Along with the ocean and the soil, they're already key carbon sinks in a natural worldwide network that cleans up about a third of our CO2 mess from the atmosphere. By adapting and expanding that role, plants are becoming an even more crucial buffer in the face of climate change.

In addition, the Australian researchers point out, these hardier, more efficient plants will also boost food production as well as save more of the world's increasingly precious water supply.

But as much as they've scrambled to adapt to changing times, plants can't save the world on their own. There's just too much CO2 piping into the atmosphere.

So maybe we should consider following the lead of the humble plant — and make changes not only as cities and nations, but also as individuals. Like, you know, by growing more plants. After all, we're all in this greenhouse together.

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