The air is nasty in Seattle today. A white smog has settled all over the city, as far as the eye can see.

But this is rather unusual. Prevailing winds have swept in wildfire smoke. (This happened last year, too, and it was all Canada’s fault [2].) Typically, Seattle’s air is pretty clean, despite the city having some of the worst traffic in the nation.

That’s not just because Seattle is crawling with Prius-driving environmentalists. No, air quality is very good pretty much everywhere in the United States. This fact stands in stark contrast to utterly absurd claims in the media [3], such as blaming air pollution for killing 155,000 Americans.

Why is there such a disconnect between reality and what the media say? Because bad news is intrinsically more interesting than good news. It’s the same reason that murder and violence grab top headlines, even though both are near historic lows.

Consider the following map provided by the World Health Organization [4]. It depicts mean annual PM2.5 (small particle) air pollution in 2014. Note that the United States -- along with Australia, Canada, and Scandinavia -- has some of the cleanest air in the world.
The WHO has recently updated this map with data from 2016:

Your eyes aren't deceiving you. American air was cleaner in 2016 than it was in 2014. The air in Europe and Japan got cleaner, too.

Of course, it's tough to declare a trend based on two data points. Maybe 2014 was an unusually stinky year. Hot weather exacerbates air pollution, so some years may have cleaner or dirtier air based solely on that. But the bigger takeaway is this: Air pollution is not a problem in the United States. It is a problem in Europe, and it is a monumental problem in Africa, Asia, and the Middle
However, just like the economy, people tend to believe that other people experience air pollution differently than they do. Todd Myers, Director of the Center for the Environment at the Washington Policy Center, told ACSH, "If you ask people whether air quality is getting better or worse, people always say worse. But then you ask how the air quality is where they are and they say good."

Don't let the media fool you. If you're an American (or Australian or Canadian or Scandinavian), air pollution should be among the least of your concerns.

Source URL: https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/08/14/american-air-clean-and-getting-cleaner-13312

Links