



## Coping with Climate Dread

**Enviro experts battle despair as doom scenarios roll in.**

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It's not just crazy people with the sandwich boards anymore: a lot of level-headed professionals [believe](#) the end of our world is nigh. Some top scientists see global warming making much of the planet [barely habitable](#) within a few generations. Or sooner.

How then do experts who believe such dire findings, yet plug away at eco-sustainable practices, still find purpose in their work? What keeps them from succumbing to climate despair? Especially after [yesterday's much panned announcement](#) by the Conservatives that Canada will wait at least 13 years before imposing "hard caps" on global warming emissions, and won't see significant cuts before 2050?

"We've overshot," sighs William Rees into the receiver at the other end of the line. "We've overshot the long-term carrying capacity of the planet to support human life."

Rees is the father of the "[ecological footprint](#)" and a world famous professor at UBC. We've been talking about new studies that suggest that because of global warming, methane gas previously frozen under the Arctic permafrost is bubbling up and escaping into the atmosphere, forcing us into the arms of global meltdown faster than you can say the Book of Revelations. As a greenhouse gas, methane is 20 times more powerful than carbon.

Climatologists call it an example of a positive feedback loop, which are like vicious ecological circles on crack. The more temperatures rise, the more permafrost melts, contributing more methane into the atmosphere, which in turn causes the earth's temperature to climb again, melting more permafrost, and on and on. We're already seeing the results.

"This year is the first time in tens of thousands of years you could take a kayak to the North Pole," Rees continues, his voice rising and his tone taking on a harder edge. "That's the evidence. So don't give me optimism about technology moving us forward, because it isn't."

Rees says he gets very tired sometimes, when it seems people aren't interested in saving even themselves.

"Are you despairing these days?" I ask.

"Yes, sometimes I am."

"What do you do about it?"

"Um, keep working," he responds quietly. "Pace up and down. Read a good book. Listen to some fine music. Sometimes I have a bottle of wine. But you've got to...you know. What are the options? I just keep on plugging away; I don't think there is really anything else you can do."

### 'Nice technical problems'

Things got bleaker in the ecological trenches after James Lovelock, guru of the Gaia hypothesis, published *The Revenge of Gaia*, where [he says](#) there's nothing to stop the earth from slouching towards "a coma" now, taking billions of us into that good night along with her.

I called up Dr. Daniel Pauly, director of the Fisheries Centre at UBC and a principal investigator of the organization [The Sea Around Us](#), who told me some mornings he has trouble getting out of bed. How does he cope with the prospect of a dying future on those days?

"I concentrate on some technical problem instead," he says, which takes me by surprise a little, even though it shouldn't.

"We have nice technical problems, as scientists, that you resolve. Most of us who are discouraged do end up doing that: looking at nice technical problems."

I rang up [Patrick Condon](#), who holds the UBC James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Liveable Environments and designs sustainable cities, to gauge his level of depression.

"I'm personally pretty discouraged often," he admitted. "Not a single week goes by without some new, extremely credible group coming to the same conclusion, and that conclusion is always that it's happening faster than even the most pessimistic scientist would have predicted, those who were scoffed at years ago."

I listened to Karen Campbell, environmental lawyer with western Canada's [Pembina Institute](#), admitting she gets so distraught over current events, she purposefully avoids reading the news for weeks sometimes. And that there have been times where governmental repeals of hard-won environmental legislation have left her feeling crushed.

"I've had days where I've left my office in tears. I've had days where I've just said, 'That's it! I can't handle this, it's just too depressing. I'm leaving.'"

David Suzuki sent an email admitting "plenty of reason to despair" but calling it "a crime against future generations to refrain from acting."

Suzuki was boiling mad at Canada's official state of denial, noting that many other countries aim for far deeper cuts, up to "90 per cent reductions by 2050. I have no idea whether that will be enough to keep the planet (from) spinning out of control."

Last of all, I chatted with Kevin Millsip, director of the youth-directed [Check Your Head](#), over a coffee in Gastown, where he revealed that on days when the unopened mail and crammed day planner don't seem to have the slightest impact, he ducks out for a matinée. That, or flips through the pages of a glossy magazine very, very slowly. Or stares at pictures.

"And then I kick myself and ask, 'Is this really the answer?'" he says with a laugh.

Depleted fish stocks, species extinction, SUV and oil obsessions, Kyoto rejections, disenfranchised youth, the Alberta tar sands and deadly methane gas: Condon says "an emerging consensus" is setting in among his colleagues; "Every hour of [our] work is in the context of 'Can the madness be stopped?'" he relates. "And when you're looking critically at the information, and using your critical functions, you often conclude that it can't be."

Which is a bitter pill to swallow, when the conclusions you draw from your professional life spell a disastrous future for your own children. When she's at her lowest, Campbell has moments where she looks at her son and second guesses the wisdom of having brought a child into the world.

"There's a really good chance there's not going to be any more polar bears when he's 30."

### **'Climate porn'**

Back in August, a Labour-friendly British think-tank released a damning report that accused the media of splashing images of "[climate porn](#)" across the newspapers and TV screens of Britons. Terrifying images of melting ice caps and freak storms sell copy, the report stated, because people get a strange satisfaction from the steady stream of horror-show global meltdown pictures paraded before their eyes.

But the effect, according to the think-tank, is public paralysis -- a mélange of impotence and dread -- since the end result is readers and viewers left feeling any action on their part is pointless in the face of global warming. Shocking and awing the citizenry bad for the environment? Who knew?

No one I talked to for this article, including David Suzuki, agreed with this conclusion, and were in fact left feeling both anger and despair at the media's botched job of handling climate change.

"I think we need more of that pornography -- quite frankly -- and you can

quote me on that," spat Condon. "Pornography in the sense of something that has direct impact and hits you pretty hard -- I'm for anything that gets the point across these days."

"I don't think we have time left to try to do this with six more scholarly publications in peer journals."

Rees agreed. "I think the media has an obligation to tell the truth. Frankly, I think the porn is the denial that appears in most of the media."

The maddening part is that the overwhelming burden of proof shouts that climate change is happening, most notably the assessments by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#). Of 750 scientific papers published on the topic of climate change, not one of them disputes that climate change is ongoing and that it's probably human induced, according to Rees.

But that isn't reflected in the press, he says, which puts coverage at a "45/55 split" between naysayers and yea-sayers.

People like [Tim Ball](#) clouding the issue are not appreciated.

"Even though [someone] is a paid person in industry, they get equal time with the thousands of independent climatologists pulled together by the UN," seethes Condon.

"Quite frankly, we should have the shit scared out of us if we want to move forward on this," says Rees.

### **Ah, to be young**

In the scientific and intellectual community, the end-times types tend to be white men with wrinkles and grey hair. Lovelock, Farley Mowat, Kurt Vonnegut, David Suzuki and Al Gore spring immediately to mind. If the tendency to eulogize Mother Earth is a function of age, how are the young and innocent faring?

Professor Pauly says not so well.

"The students are quite upset because they get that feeling of doom, and this is not compatible with their age," he says. "The bounty that they assumed was going to be theirs is not there."

Condon says many of his students are "largely unaware" of things like positive feedback loops and recent [NASA reports](#) that say we'll only lose one-quarter of the planet's species to global warming if we make severe changes to society right now.

"And these are students that have chosen an environmental career," Condon adds.

Talking about how youth are grappling with climate change with Millsip, the

discussion turns to a virtual reality game called [Second Life](#), where almost a million people log on to create an exciting alternate reality far removed from the rising mercury of this one.

"Some people are engaging in these communities because they feel they can actually affect the outcome of this universe," says Millsip, who thinks there's "an uncomfortable discussion about power to be had" between the high school kids he works with and the power brokers running the show today. Unresponsive political systems, he says, will never encourage kids to rally around the flag to tackle solutions for global warming.

## **The end**

So what might it take to get people to really change their ways? What should the average person do to stave off the coming cataclysm?

"Extra-powerful air conditioners for Phoenix, Arizona might be a big sell," Condon observes with dark irony.

"Some days I'm not so sanguine about the capacity of people to actually change," worries Condon, who completes the thought adding that he thinks it would be "immoral" for him to stand back and do nothing.

Rees gets philosophical: "I suppose I'm an existentialist: you have to decide what you're going to do," he says. "I mean I could go and shoot myself, I'm wealthy enough to put my feet up, go out and buy myself a boat and a case of rum and enjoy the remaining days of my life."

But, like the others, Rees has resolved to continue the fight, and to see global warming through, in whatever shape or form life on earth takes in the coming decades. Just because this is the grimmest thing we've ever faced as a species doesn't mean they're throwing in the towel. Far from it.

But it's going to take some work.

"The very tendencies that gave such us a leg up in the competition with the other species 50,000 years ago are maladaptive today," Rees concludes.

"Now, if we are intelligent enough to recognize that, at least in theory we should be able to over-ride our biological predispositions. If we don't, we're doomed."

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