



Published on Straight.com Vancouver (<http://www.straight.com>)

Maintain hope, all ye who enter here

After sitting through two days of presentations from some of the world's leading climatologists, ecologists, and fisheries scientists at a recent conference titled *Are We Killing the World's Oceans?*, a person could be forgiven for leaving the deliberations with another question in mind, something like, *Why should I bother getting up tomorrow morning?*

The conference began with a presentation by UBC's Daniel Pauly, the world-renowned fisheries scientist. He told a packed auditorium of about 1,000 people at the University of Victoria that large-scale fisheries have expanded so rapidly in recent years that most of the seafood available to feed humanity now comes from stocks that are either at the brink of collapse or already overfished and near gone.

Canadians who live on the country's West Coast are fortunate, you could say, because they already have ready access to Chinese seafood products, made from jellyfish, that can be spread on crackers like peanut butter. Develop a taste for it now, Pauly advised. At the rate things are going, that's the only wild-fish choice we're going to have.

Inevitably, the focus of the UVic conference was global warming. But the discussions were more animated around another, rarely considered ecological effect of pumping all those greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Global warming is actually only half the story. The other half involves the way the spike in greenhouse gases, a result of global industrialization and fossil-fuel burning, has also overwhelmed the capacity of the world's oceans to absorb all that carbon dioxide.

Just one result, described in grim detail by Stanford University research scientist Ken Caldeira, is that the world's coral reefs, and all the diverse forms of plant and animal life they support, are pretty well doomed because the oceans are becoming increasingly acidic. The organisms that produce coral reefs can't survive.

Then there are the growing "dead zones" in the seas. Just one of these oxygen-deprived, fishless patches of ocean is a swath several hundred sea miles in length that started showing up off the coast of Oregon about five years ago. Lisa Levin of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography explained that the dead zones bloom in the summer, when the ambient temperature is highest. But it's not clear what role global warming is playing in the spread of dead zones.

By the final panel, the mood was a bit black, so it was a welcome relief to hear from Ken Denman, a soft-spoken federal fisheries scientist who works at the Canadian Centre for Climate Modelling and Analysis at UVic: "If we're all so cynical, then there is no hope," he said. "I think we have to lay aside our cynicism and be idealists if we really want to see any change happen."

Real change will have to be driven by hard science and clear thinking. That was the point hammered home by Andrew Weaver, the outspoken UVic climatologist who was one of the lead authors of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report released in Paris last month. Weaver delivered a blistering presentation that treated eco-alarmists and industry-funded climate-change deniers with the contempt both sides deserve.

Weaver's presentation began with a big-screen image of a shock-horror tabloid's depiction of the Statue of Liberty sinking into the Atlantic under the headline: "Oceans Rising 150 Feet". The next was a blaring Victoria Times-Colonist headline, "Coastal Flood Feared", above a report about the now-notorious claim by the Sierra Club of Canada's British Columbia chapter (an organization with which I was once closely associated, I should disclose) that global warming will put Victoria underwater, to depths of between six and 25 metres, by the end of this century.

"This is nothing more than scientific fiction and media sensationalism," Weaver said about the Sierra stunt. "It can do a great disservice to the scientific community, making us look like we have no idea what's going on."

The IPCC projects sea levels to rise perhaps more than half a metre by century's end. For low-lying areas around the Bay of Bengal, dozens of densely populated islands in the Indian Ocean, and mangrove regions throughout the tropics, that will be horrific enough.

The flip side of climate-change alarmism is conspiracy-mongering of the kind that Stephen Harper—Canada's oil-patch prime minister—was engaging in as recently as 2002. In a fundraising letter, Harper described the "job-killing, economy-destroying Kyoto accord" as a "socialist scheme to suck money out of wealth-producing nations".

Global warming can't be stopped. It's too late for that. Greenhouse gases are accumulating in the atmosphere at a rate unlike anything in 650,000 years. But humanity can scale back its greenhouse-gas emissions to slow the rate and reduce the scale of ecological disruption. That's what the Kyoto Protocol is for.

We're long past the point when Canadians needed to be convinced that stern measures are necessary to put fisheries back on a sustainable footing, and Canadians know full well that global warming is the greatest single challenge facing humanity. Everyone's waiting for real leadership.

British Columbia's provincial government has finally woken up to its obligations, setting greenhouse-gas reduction targets that are as robust as those of any jurisdiction in North America. Now it's Ottawa's turn.

The time for cynicism is over.

The Chronicles blog can be found at ***transmontanus.blogspot.com/***

Source URL:

<http://www.straight.com/article-73037/maintain-hope-all-ye-who-enter-here>