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Criticality . . .

Posted on December 16th, 2009 by earlehollland

In physics, it might be called a “critical mass” – the point when a process has garnered enough energy to be self-sustaining.

That’s precisely what science needs now – critical mass.

Scientists who use animals in their research have faced decades of opposition from animal rights and animal welfare activists. Those loud and boisterous voices have continually tarred much of the biomedical research field, labeling such scientists as torturers and abusers and misrepresenting both the process of science and the progress it has brought.

But for years, most of these researchers refused to take a stance against this onslaught, rationalizing that if they weren’t personally attacked, then they wouldn’t be affected. That changed in the last two years, especially on the U.S. West Coast, with attacks by activists using arson and bombings, property damage and even threats on researchers’ lives to make their points.

Recently a critical mass was reached. The community of scientists and the public revolted and publicly opposed the actions of activists.

They collectively said, “Enough’s enough!”

That’s what’s needed now with climate change science. And the need is much more desperate than it was with animal research.

The public’s lack of understanding complex climate science, enhanced by the vested interests of many who oppose any fossil fuel restrictions or business constraints, have melded into an atmosphere where citizens’ disbelief in science is now skewing our public policy.



The theft of emails and files from the computer system at one of the world’s most respected science centers was a gift for those opposed to the notion that humans are largely responsible for climate change. Selective interpretations of some messages, coupled with imprudent comments by some scientists, frustrated by years of attacks, has strengthened what much of the public seems ready to believe – that scientists have lied about the extent and severity of global climate change.

The result: Many researchers are hunkering down and waiting for the storm

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- * [May 2010](#)
- * [April 2010](#)
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- * [August 2009](#)
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to blow over, convinced that eventually the facts and data will convince those opposed and those oblivious that the threat is real.

It's understandably human to move away from strife, to avoid confrontation with those whose passion has overrun their reason.

But climate scientists need to reject that reaction.

They need to heed the call of one of their own, voiced in San Francisco this week at the annual meeting of the American Geophysical Union. Ben Santer, a respected researcher at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and a former recipient of one of the prestigious MacArthur, or "Genius," grants, set the stage.

Just before his scheduled address to an audience of earth scientists, he went off-script with a **personal plea and warning**. In part, he said:

These "forces of unreason" seek to constrain our ability to speak truth to power. They seek to skew and distort what we know about the nature and causes of climate change. Having failed to undermine climate science itself, they seek to destroy the reputations of individual climate scientists. They seek to destroy men . . . who have devoted their entire careers to the pursuit of scientific knowledge and understanding.

We must not let this stand.

We no longer have the luxury of remaining silent on these issues. We all have voices. We need to use them.

His call to arms, emailed to more than 150 of the leading researchers in the field, will be difficult for many scholars. Scientists are inherently committed to the premise that the value of facts and data will eventually outlast any misrepresentation or fabrication, that "staying the course" will eventually win the day.

That, they say, is the way science works.

But in today's world, "spin" often reigns and the wrappings often outshine whatever a package may contain. The idea that patient diligence will eventually succeed is more than simple naïve – it may be dangerous.

Scholars need to find a comfortable middle ground between their historical reluctance to engage in public debate over science, and the current push for them to be politically active.

Finding such a path shouldn't be so hard for those who make discoveries for a living. *Earle Holland*



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[Norma](#) // Dec 19, 2009 at 7:51 pm

It's really insulting to say we don't understand.

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