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Who cares?

Posted on May 17th, 2011 by earlehollland

Among those who do science (as well as those of us who cheer from the sidelines) the loss of public interest in recent years robs the soul.

Many scientists, fueled by a curiosity that blossomed in childhood about how the world works, are driven to understand, to know and decipher, and to unravel nature's mysteries. And like most humans with passionate feelings, they feel the need to share what they've learned.

Sadly, it seems, few among the public care.

About the facts, that is . . . fewer people seem to care about the facts when forming their opinions on issues involving science and public policy. Through the last decade, we've seen this happen repeatedly where the rate at which science reveals new facts constantly increases while the intensity of disbelief among the public grows as well.

It's almost as if there is an **inverse relationship** [science-speak] between new knowledge and support of it. Biological evolution, stem cell research, genetically modified organisms – all have seen this quandary, but nowhere more than with climate change.

Polls continue to show an ever-decreasing acceptance among the public that the climate is changing and that humans are playing a big role in that change, in spite of the fact that the evidence grows stronger and stronger by the week.



Two cases in point . . .

Earlier this month, the Vatican's **Pontifical Academy of Sciences** released a report on the "**Fate of Mountain Glaciers in the Anthropocene**," based on discussions from a two-day conference in April attended by some of the world's leading climate scientists.

The report recommended specific actions: Reducing carbon dioxide emissions worldwide immediately; reducing soot, methane, ozone and other atmospheric pollutants by up to 50 percent, and beginning the hard challenges of adapting to the societal changes that the altered climate has caused, and will cause in the future.

In essence, the science advisory group for the Pope of the Catholic Church, with its more than 1 billion believers, said that climate change was real and we need to do something about it! And while the report's findings got some news coverage, it paled in comparison to coverage of other topics like the latest on Charlie Sheen or the hacking into the Playstation network.

A few days later, America's **National Research Council**, a study arm of the

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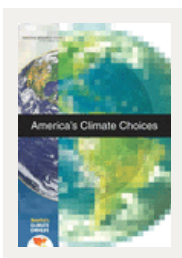
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National Academy of Sciences, released its own report, "America's Climate Choices," which offered assessments and recommendations similar to those in the Vatican's report. The NRC report echoed the call for immediate action to reduce climate change and adapt to what has happened already.

And yet this report also floundered in news coverage compared to reporting on the latest fad or celebrity.

All of this comes at a time when scientists are being admonished to "go public," to reach out to the population and, in a sense, force-feed the latest science findings to people who seem oblivious and disinterested.



Why should they?

Most rational folk, when asked, agree with the general idea that science functions in support of humanity and society, that it is a worthwhile calling and one our culture should foster. But at the same time, all too many of those same folks will discount the new knowledge science offers when it conflicts with their own beliefs, or with their own vested interests.

They will stick their fingers in their ears and claim not to hear. And we can do little to change that.

Zealotry for science seems noble at first. But it's hard to maintain in the face of those who don't care. *—Earle Holland*



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10 Responses to "Who cares?"

James Hathaway // May 18, 2011 at 8:14 am

Well, Earle, as the saying goes, denial is not just a river in Egypt. The curious thing that those of us who write about science are running up against now is that the inconvenient (an really pretty obvious) truths that science inevitably talks about are not popular with all the people who would rather it were not so. This means, as the comic's joke, "that reality has a well-known liberal bias" and science journalism has become somewhat distasteful because it is now embedded firmly amidst the political discourse and political realities of our time.

I just got back from your neck of the woods, picking up my daughter from Kenyon and visiting relatives in Cleveland. My brother-in-law, who is a conservative DA in Cleveland, was in a foul mood because of the constant cold and rain (with the subsequent flooded cornfields and ball fields) you guys have been having this spring and he quipped at me: "now you can't tell me that this is because of global warming." When I tried to explain to him that indeed I could, because global warming meant significant changes in water temperatures in the world's oceans,

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and subsequent changes in periodic global weather patterns (etc.), he cut me off and said "I don't care. I haven't had a raise in four years and I just want my gas back at \$2 a gallon." End of discussion. I'm afraid, like Jeremiah, all we can do is keep pointing out where the research is leading. They may not listen, but they still need to be told.

Mike Moore // May 19, 2011 at 9:06 am

This is certainly a very important concept.

I wonder if anyone has more to say about solutions to the challenges in communication and long-term thinking.

Are we really calling all scientists back to the ivory tower and closing the door on the foolish masses?

Or is there more to explore about tackling large problems, in which we can include leading change and motivating societies?

I would dare to say the latter.

Carol Landis // May 19, 2011 at 9:22 am

There's a significant effort and growing movement among the faithful to heed the call to be good stewards of Earth. So I resist the notion that little attention is being paid to this information. Rather, I think it's fair to say that the media paid little attention.

Many people are focused on the immediate needs of family and friends who are really struggling. The changes they feel are immediate and in some cases dire. In comparison, climate change is perceived to be a more distant threat. In my opinion, this is the more unfortunate reality, since I believe we are seeing increasing evidence of abrupt climate change now. It is not a distant threat at all. Just as is true of addressing slow-growing and unseen issues (like termites and cancer), waiting too long increases the total cost of repairs and affects the final outcome as well. It is simply bad management to ignore the predictions made by a majority of experts in any field.

Interfaith Power & Light, with affiliates in 38 states, encourages leaders in every faith group to keep our eyes and minds focused on the gifts we've been given, our obligation to care for them, and the collective effects of human activities regarding climate change. One of the easiest, most, and cash-saving ways to do that is through conservation of energy. Those often-behavioral changes give immediate satisfaction and can help with how money needs to be spent each month too. Awareness of strategies to reduce energy use often leads to a better awareness of why this is important.

Take heart! The number of people who care and are acting now is growing!

[earleholland](#) // May 19, 2011 at 9:44 am

Carol: With respect, I don't agree that the problem is only the lack of media coverage. All the recent important opinion polls in the past few years have shown a substantial decrease in the percentages of people who believe (1) that the global climate is changing and (2) that humans

are substantially to blame for it. This despite the overwhelming evidence from the scientific community. And that is, simply put, alarming for the future.

I agree that immediate needs for family and friends now dominate the concerns of most people and that, frankly, is probably as it should be. It's not so much the lack of attention that climate change has been getting that bothers me — it's the overt and intentional growing campaign opposing the whole idea, especially the role humans play, that worries me. The polarization of society that's arisen in the last decade is devastating to rational thought and science, and to those who believe in those concepts.

I am aware that in many cases, the leadership in the faith community is calling for action to deal with the threats of climate change, but just as many on the fundamentalist side are also feeding to the anti-science bent, which is anything but constructive for the future.

Mike: We're certainly not "calling all scientists back to the ivory tower and closing the door on the foolish masses" but it is fair to question the logic in some of those who are calling for scientists to shoulder the responsibility of leading the charge, which has been proposed by persons both inside and outside the scientific community.

The problem will affect all of society. The proper role for scientists is to provide the data and knowledge that can explain the scope of the threat — the public shares the responsibility to take that information and act accordingly. __EH

Mike Moore // May 19, 2011 at 12:22 pm

Thanks for your response, Earle.

I would have to say that I can agree with it much easier than the (no doubt intentionally) provocative post.

I am still a little surprised by the proposed dichotomy of "scientists" vs. "The public" in leading change.

I think all people do have responsibility as citizens of the world.

But I think it is unrealistic to expect enough individuals to choose alone to make a difference.

Certainly all basic scientists need not take on the role of politicians or advocates.

But we can choose to support the political and social leaders and social advocates of our societies.

And indeed, leadership, motivation, and decision-making are active areas of research!

Before we science should turn away from the challenge of change — and, with respect, before pointing fingers — should we perhaps find ways to promote the research and practice of leading change?

[earleholland](#) // May 19, 2011 at 1:49 pm

Mike: One major problem is that once a scientist/researcher takes on the role of advocate, they automatically sacrifice their role as independent

assessor of the information/data/evidence. They suddenly shift from expert to proponent, or opponent, to an issue or an idea, and they lose their standing as being “outside” of the argument. In effect, they just become another shouting voice. That’s why it is essential that researchers be very careful in not losing their authority on science policy issues, especially in this time of extreme polarization of issues!__EH

Carol Landis // May 19, 2011 at 4:04 pm

Upon re-reading my comment, I see that I should have proofread before posting. I should have written, “Interfaith Power & Light, with affiliates in 38 states, encourages leaders _within_ faith groups to keep our eyes and minds focused on the gifts we’ve been given, our obligation to care for them, and the collective effects of human activities regarding climate change.” I’ve seen those poll results, but I’m still encouraged by actions being taken by youth (iMatter March) and by groups of people who are passionate about changing the status quo: LEAF, NRDC, <http://www.ilovemountains.org>, greenfaith.org, christianecology.org, etc. Quoting Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.” We will need to be persistent, however, and INSIST on accountability.

Will // Jun 28, 2011 at 7:21 pm

Earle...Do you think religion plays in important role over peoples acceptance of scientific discoveries?

I don’t think it’s a matter of if people are just rejecting science, I think everyone has questions and is curious, but when it interferes with religious beliefs they are less likely to ask questions.

When I was a child I once asked how God was created and to my dismay I was told “If you don’t believe in God you shouldn’t be here.”

These are the people I’m referring to when it comes to accepting discoveries.

Mike Carrell // Jul 18, 2011 at 10:58 am

Yale recently published a study that shows education is actually not a factor in whether or not the public will believe science. The higher one is educated, the more intense their viewpoint is. It is actually culture and ideology which shape the points of view, which is not surprising.

See: <http://reason.com/archives/2011/07/12/scientific-literacy-climate-ch>

PS3 Yellow Light of Death // Aug 16, 2011 at 11:46 am

I am partly inclined to go with what Will said in maybe its a Religion thing that can effect people and their opinion, or more in particluar the general upbringing.

As the Post Title states ‘Who Cares?’, if you were to ask that question related to this topic across a range of different beliefs, religion or

upbringing then the answers would be different for sure and in some way reflect their respective background.

What do you think Earle?

Regards,

Phil.

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