

COMOX VALLEY CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 20

My Anthropocene Conversion

I'm an Anthropocene convert. I might be called an "anthropocenist." (I think I just coined a word). In this chronicle I'll describe how I got there. It is not about believing the Anthropocene exists. The science is clear. It's about believing that we humans can do something about it. My conversion occurred in three stages.

Stage One: My introduction. I first came across the term "Anthropocene" in an article I read four or five years ago. The prefix "Anthro" means "human": and "cene" indicates a geological period. This is the first human-created era. The Anthropocene replaces the Holocene Era that began eleven thousand years ago when the ice fields receded. Its dominant characteristic is climate change.

I was happy that the scientists found a new term for our current age but it didn't mean much to me at the time.

Stage Two: Whistling in the Dark. As I learned more about the Anthropocene however it began to take on a great deal of meaning. And what I learned was quite scary.

We are experiencing terrible hurricanes, storms and forest fires, the poisoning of the oceans and rising seawaters, chemicalizing of our soils, receding ice fields in the Arctic and Antarctic, destruction of species, and on and on. Many scientists began referring to the Anthropocene as the road to the Sixth Great Extinction.

The most visible characteristic of the new Anthropocene age is the way it is changing our world and how we think about it. We were accustomed to think of Earth in terms of the steady seasonal cycles. Now a new consciousness is emerging. We are beginning to think in terms of irreversible transformations. As Arnold Swarzenegger, the former governor of California once said, "There used to be regular forest-fire season. But with global warming every season is a forest fire season."

Thinking about the challenge of this transformation in our consciousness I'm reminded of poet Robert Hass' ironic observation, "*Earth is in need of protections. We are the only protectors of Earth. We are who Earth needs protection from.*"

So what do we do about the Anthropocene? How do we remain optimistic while defending ourselves and even our sanity? It is not very clear. Surrounded by scary possibilities and not knowing what to do, I felt like I was trying to encourage myself by whistling in the dark.

Stage Three: My Conversion

I finally decided to get beyond theory and try and find an example of people who had experience dealing with a difficult environment and survived by learning to adapt. I thought of the Inuit who have lived in what is undoubtedly the most severe environment on Earth.

Over several decades I did community development work in all the Inuit communities on Baffin Island and in the Eastern Arctic. Since there were no roads I flew to communities in small planes. After a couple of scary flights I became a very shaky flyer. (My solution to strong turbulence was prayer.) My big concern was what would happen if we were forced to land in the tundra miles from a settlement. How would we survive? I got into the habit of looking over the passengers to find an Inuk elder. I knew if we landed miles from nowhere the elder and I would become very good friends.

Looking down from the plane window I saw an unending, empty frozen terrain that extended for hundreds of miles in all directions. How did the Inuit possibly survive in this environment for a thousand years?

They were creative. They learned to construct and live in snow houses at 50 or 60 degrees below zero,

They were psychologically resilient. They manage to live on an unforgiving land in several months of total winter darkness and maintain their sanity?

They were resourceful. Using whatever materials they could find they made their qamutiics (sleds) out of wale bones and drift wood that washed up on the beach. They used frozen fish as sled runners.

They were practical and strong. They learned to deal with the cold by making clothing out of the furs of the animals they hunted. They learned to make long spears with bone tips and stand in freezing temperatures for hours over the seal's breathing holes.

This was all a mystery to me but I knew if they could adapt to such a severe climate we could do the same—and with a lot more resources than they had.

The Inuit have taught us the two key principles of survival. .

First, their environment was not something “out there”. An early anthropological study of Inuit hunters was entitled, “*I Am I and My Environment.*” So it must be for us.

Second, to survive, everyone in their small nomadic communities—male and female, young and old, healthy or sick—had to play their part. So it must be for us.

Mike Bell,
Comox Valley Climate Change Chronicles.