

## Climate Change Chronicle 5

### Preparing for the Worst While Hoping for the Best

If, after reading the title of this climate change article you think it is about both bad news and good news, you would be right.

The bad news is contained in two recent articles in the New York Times. I'll summarize the articles but provide the links so you can read them for yourself. The good news is about hope....but a different concept of hope.

I'll start with the bad news. The first article is about the failure of scientists to accurately predict the full impact of climate change on our lives. The second article, linked to the first article, explains how climate change will have a devastating effect upon our economies.

Then comes the good news—about hope. As you will see, it is an essential capacity we need in order to deal with climate change and the truck load of problems that is charging down the road right at us.

I'll conclude with some advice from a well-known scientist. So let's get to it.

#### Preparing For the Worst: The Two Articles

The first article is "[\*How Scientists Got Climate Change So Wrong\*](#)". According to the author Eugene Linden, "Few thought it would arrive so quickly. Now we are facing consequences once viewed as fringe scenarios".

During most of the 1900s scientists were convinced that significant changes in the climate took hundreds or even thousands of years to occur. The planet was relatively stable and sudden changes were highly unlikely.

But a shift in their thinking began in the 1960s and early 70s. A few scientists began studying what happened after the last Ice Age. They concluded that climate changes may have occurred suddenly. But those scientists were considered to be outliers. In 1975 a report from the National Academy of Science declared that it would take centuries for the climate to change in a meaningful way.

Then, in the early 1990s scientists took a closer look at ice core samples in the icefields of Greenland. They discovered twenty-five rapid climate changes in the last glacial period. But they still estimated in 1995 that little change was expected over the next hundred years. Climate change would proceed at a leisurely pace. Now the latest studies show that if the icefields in Greenland and Antarctica continue to melt at the

current rapid rate, sea levels could rise by an estimated 225 feet by the end of this century. This would inundate most of the world's coastal cities like New York, London, and Hong Kong. As Linden put it, *"Before that (the analysis of the Greenland ice cores) almost nobody confidently believed that the climate could change massively within a decade or two; after the report nobody felt sure that it could not."*

Today we are experiencing regular hurricanes coming across the Caribbean wreaking destruction on the Islands and Lower U.S; huge forest fires in Australia, the western United States and Canada; massive flooding in the farming areas of the Midwest; temperatures of 110 degrees scorching Paris, Berlin and most of Western Europe. And all the while President Trump is removing as many protective environmental laws as he can get his hands on. It is not a pretty picture.

The Second Article is [\*Climate Change Will Cost Us Even More Than We Think: Economists greatly underestimate the price tag on harsher weather and higher seas. Why is that?\*](#) By Naomi Oreskes and Nicholas Stern

In answer to their question, the authors give three reasons:

The first one is simple. Since scientists have been underestimating the rate of climate change and the severity of its effects, (as noted above) the economists will necessarily underestimate their costs. This failure could have drastic and potentially catastrophic impacts on citizens, communities and companies. As the authors note, we estimate the cost of things from our experience. But we have no experience estimating the cost of radical climate changes.

The second reason is that scientists cannot estimate the value of things like biodiversity or the costs of ocean acidification. The economists simply leave the potential impacts on the planet out of their economic models.

A third and terrifying problem involves cascading effects. We live in a world of integrated systems. A problem in one area, say flooding that limits food production along with higher temperatures, can present serious health problems for those with poor health or limited financial resources. In worst case scenarios climate impacts could set off social and political disruptions which would undermine both democracy and our capacity to prevent further climate damage.

The authors note in closing that there is a real urgency. We cannot wait for the results of research to deepen our understanding and reduce the uncertainty about the risks. It is essential that we pursue a greener economic path for growth and development. If we do that we might have a happy ending. But, if we wait to be more certain, the only certainty is that we will regret it.

## Hoping For the Best

By now after reading these summaries or after reading the articles themselves you might come away depressed. I know I did. But then, sitting back and thinking about the future, I found myself thinking about hope.

In our troubled world hope has gotten a bad rap. For many it is simply “wishing upon a star”. or “pie in the sky” or imagining a beautiful fairy-tale future. That’s not my version of hope.

My hope authority is St. Augustine. He was the Bishop of Hippo in Africa. He lived in the fifth century at the end of the Roman Empire when the barbarian hordes were banging on the gates of the city. Augustine, living in such turbulent times, thought a great deal about hope. He said, *Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.*”

So what is the basis for this kind of hope in a climate changing world? It comes down to a personal awareness of a relationship. Earth is living and it has given birth to us and cared for us since time immemorial. It is not something “out there”. It is something within us.

When we come to this awareness we also recognize that there is hope for our future. But, as Augustine has explained, it requires action: anger at the way things are—and particularly at our economic, political and legal systems that are destroying Earth and are the major cause of climate change. We must have the courage to act so that the current systems do not remain the way they are. We must make transitions to create new systems that can live within a living Earth. And we must join with other community members in working to develop a different but realistic future.

## The Way Forward

I’ll conclude with some advice from Albert Einstein in how to prepare for a hopeful future. On the negative side he said, *“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”* Translation: we can’t fix our problems by trying to fix the systems that are causing the problems. We need to think about how to create new systems that can live within a living Earth.

And what kind of thinking was he referring to? A kind of thinking that is based upon a new and different relationship with Earth. Einstein put it this way.

*A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to*

*affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”*

Am I hopeful? Yes I am. Two and a half years ago when I started writing these chronicles I rarely heard anything about climate change on the television news or on line. Today there is a blizzard of articles, commentaries and whole sections dedicated to information about people facing the reality of climate change. I'm very hopeful.

Mike Bell, Comox Valley Climate Change Network.