

An Ecosystem, If You Can Keep It

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Recently, I was talking with someone who denied human-caused climate change was occurring. I did the only thing I could as I scientist. I apologized to him.

I apologized because we scientists were always taught that once we published our work in peer-reviewed scientific journals our job was done. After that it was up to the public and the policy makers to take our science and use it. Unfortunately, this practice left a breach—an absence of readily understandable information and further contact with scientists—which other people with impure motives could fill with half-truths and misinformation. I told him that obviously he would never subject his family, himself, or the outdoors he loved to climate change if he had the same data I did. He would demand that governments reduce emissions immediately. I could only surmise that it was because we couldn't effectively share what we know with him and were crowded out by a massive influx of dollars being put forth to counteract our science by a small number of people who think that extreme short-term gain is better than long-term sustainability.

I have travelled widely, both before and after I assumed the presidency of AFS (as a side note, I bought four times the carbon offsets than miles I am travelling). All our fisheries issues are working against the backdrop of climate change. How many fisheries talks have you heard that both climate change and “insert issue here (overharvest, instream flow, etc.)” are affecting our aquatic resources? Personal experiences are the most dramatic. My graduate students and I evacuated when faced with a wall of fire rolling over the hill from the largest fire in Arizona history; and we rescued endangered fishes from a stream in the approach of yet another onrushing fire. These wildfires occurred in a decade that experienced the 10 largest fires in Arizona history. At the Midwest Fish and Wildlife Conference, I discussed record flooding that is affecting fisheries, including rivers overflowing their banks and lake levels at the highest ever seen, with biologists from several Midwestern states. I learned about fish populations off the coasts of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland from marine biologists attending the Canadian Conference for Fisheries Research. These scientists told me they are seeing rivers that do not contain the same species they used to catch—that species are moving north—and that they even captured clownfish, a tropical fish species, in their nets in these northern coastal environments. At the Australian Society for Fisheries Biology, I asked Australian scientists about the Great Barrier Reef, saying, “I understand you have lost 50% of your shallow water corals.” Their reply was, “Try like 90% in some areas, mate.” I recently received a message from the President of the Australian Society of Fisheries Biology that she and her family had to sleep in the car as they were evacuating raging wildfires in southern Australia, where fish, wildlife, trees, and even people were being burned. She said that they and their fellow citizens were beyond angry, tired, and frustrated.

Folks, enough is enough. I don't know about you, but I am getting tired of hearing excuses why we cannot do anything about this climate crisis. I'm tired of hearing why we can't tackle the underlying problem, greenhouse gas emissions. I'm getting tired of hearing why we shouldn't peel off a bit of money to protect our way of life, including our aquatic ecosystems. North Americans are environmental leaders. We developed the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. We developed the National Park System. We developed the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Wildlife Refuge System. Damn it, we need to show the same strength as Teddy Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and even Ronald Reagan did when protecting lands (Roosevelt and Lincoln), protecting air and water (Nixon), promoting new forms of energy (Carter), and showing leadership when ultimately confronting worldwide environmental problems like the ozone hole (Reagan).

This is the mid-point of my presidency, so I am checking in with you. Have you spoken with friends, relatives, chambers of commerce, your local Kiwanis club, your local sportfish club, your local environmental club about the science of climate change? Have you spoken to them how unchecked climate change affects aquatic species and society, why people need to speak out, and not shy away from addressing the issue? Have you tried some of the conversational techniques we provide on the AFS website, in previous President's Hooks, and communication techniques others have discussed? We *can* do something about this, but we need to prioritize it and act. We need not accept climate change as the status quo, but fight the apathy so we can march down the bright pathway to a world of less greenhouse gas emissions, cleaner air and water, and higher quality of life for both us and aquatic species.

There are plenty of reasons for hope, because we North Americans have tackled very tough issues before. Furthermore, we have served as models for environmental clean-up to other countries. We cleaned up the Cuyahoga River flowing into Lake Erie when it caught fire more than 10 times. We cleaned up the massive problem of roadside littering that occurred in the mid-20th century. We healed the ozone hole and tackled acid rain. We can do it, but we will not do it if we are silent and accept the status quo. Share the science and the consequences of not doing something. This is not advocacy, this is educating. As AFS President, I will keep pushing you. I'm really a pretty cheerful guy, but I see speaking out forcefully about the climate issue and its effect on aquatic species as my job and my duty to AFS and you. This wonderful world's ecosystem is ours to enjoy, if we can keep it.

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