

An Emerging Scientist Explores the Intersection between Climate Activism and Science

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By Dave Bonan

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“I’m good!” the climate activist and co-founder of 350.org, Bill McKibben, said to the University of Washington Program on Climate Change as he casually tossed peanuts into his mouth and responded to our welcoming how-are-you-doing-question. **“Sorry, I was confused with the timing this morning, I had a call with Bernie Sanders.”** he said after a small delay.

For any aspiring scientist, communication is a rough topic to deal with. If one spends their life getting to the point where they earn a PhD, how do they make the science accessible to the general public? Moreover, the intersection and balance of climate activism and climate science enters the mind after witnessing the hostile political environment that revolves around climate change. Growing up in the environmentally conscious town of Boulder, Colorado and being exposed to the predicted consequences of climate change, it is only natural that I am interested in studying the environment. However, I wonder if the best path forward for myself and others is to continue to push forward the research of climate and climate change or to become an activist that communicates climate science to the masses, or do both? This question is what inspired the interview below and frames part of the conversation.

Dave Bonan: My name is David Bonan and I am the Undergraduate Assistant at the University of Washington Program on Climate Change. I am joined on the video call here by Miriam Bertram, the Program Manager at the UW PCC, and Alex Lenferna, a graduate affiliate from the Philosophy Department at UW, who helped formulate some of these questions. Miriam can help explain the scope and goals of the PCC...

Miriam Bertram: Very briefly, we began as a program to bring together a community of geoscientists working on climate change issues 12 years ago. Since then we have been working to collaborate with non-geoscientists to bring an understanding of the basic climate system more broadly, and even beyond that, we work with graduate and even undergraduate students now, like David, to go even further and bring the geosciences out into the education arena.

DB: A big part for me is to wonder where I belong in the environmental realm. For example, you have clearly put yourself in the activist standpoint within climate change and many emerging students, such as myself, are at a standstill of what to do. We have grown up learning of climate change, understanding the key components, and we feel it is necessary to act now. However, what is our method of acting? Does an emerging scientist now-a-days align themselves to the research of climate change or do they become an activist who communicates climate change to the masses, or do both?

Bill McKibben: Well, there is no use in stopping the research, that is what makes scientists useful in the first place. The question is how far do people take that in the direction of activism? And I think that the answer increasingly is further and further.

DB: Interesting, it is like a new addition to a scientist’s plate.

BM: However, this is not the way that it should be. It is not a sensible or rationale outcome. In a rational system, scientists would offer their warnings, which have been clear, obvious and persistent for years; and then the political system would go to work taking into account those warnings. 25 years ago we would have begun a slow gradual shift in the direction of sensible policies. It has been more and more important for scientists to add to their scientific labors a certain amount of citizenship, of activism.

BM: It is all of our duties to have a certain amount of citizenship. We all work 9-5 jobs, and that allows us an activist standpoint after hours and on weekends.

Bill considers activism the responsibility of all citizens, including scientists. However, what about the stigma that is tied with activism?

DB: What is the role of student now-a-days that comes into this hostile political environment? Right now, I am at a standstill, I am intending to study atmospheric science as a way to enact change, but should I look to the more philosophical/political route for the best change?

BM: Well, it depends on what one or yourself is best at. A good atmospheric scientist is more use than a mediocre philosopher, and vice-versa. Whatever it is you or someone studies, we need you to be a citizen of that university and of that. We need people that are citizens of their state, country, and planet.

DB: And with that, what about the effectiveness of science communication? If the science is there and has been there for activism why hasn't the problem been solved?

BM: We have no problem taking scientific data and using it to get people to take action, I mean we've formed a big global activist network using a scientific data point as our name (350.org).

DB: But wouldn't you say effective communication is still an issue if climate change is not at the forefront of peoples' minds or the forefront of this presidential election?

BM: Oh it is definitely still an issue. You get there by building bigger movements and more education, there is no magic solution. I mean there is improvement, last election climate change was not even discussed and this election it has been a hot democratic topic.

DB: Would you have any advice on how to bridge the gap of communication even better than it has been?

BM: Well, the science itself is what it is, but it takes citizens to communicate and connect that. Whether or not a scientist is a vocal citizen is their decision.

BM: To go further, ideas are then brought on by science. For example, last summer in Seattle, people took that science and decided that they were going to go block drilling rigs heading to the arctic with their kayaks in Puget Sound. Those people were acting on science. They understood perfectly well what the science behind drilling in the arctic would do to cause further harm. I believe that that was a perfect example of good scientific intervention on a political activist issue.

DB: So a lot of what you are saying is that the science is there and in, but it takes courageous people to act, fight back, and bridge the gap between science and policy.

BM: That is right, but scientists are a particularly useful part of that coalition because they bring particular credibility. When we had the Global Climate March in New York in 2014, and had 400,000 people marching in the street, we very purposefully asked scientists to wear white lab coats to explain the knowledge and thought behind this movement. That in a sense, is scientific activism.

DB: To finish off the science-activist communication gap, do you have anything to say with scientists who work for universities or governmental organizations where vocal opinions are not the best?

BM: For someone eager to express and opinion, do it after hours and on weekends. I mean, you are not confined by your job for your life, you owe them your 9-5 and when you are on the clock, you follow the rules, but they do not own you. They employ you.

DB: To conclude on the intersection of climate activism and science, would you say it is hard for the two to coexist in today's scientific world? Especially, if you have an arrest record or a bias?

BM: My sense is that if you are a good enough scientist, it will be less of a problem. However, if there are places that people feel they cannot do much more than their science, then whatever, but they need to realize that we are in an emergency here and that it is going to take many to live outside of their comfort zones to enact change. I don't think there are non-activists and activists, one can find the place where there is science and communication.

DB: Well, that seems to be it on the questions we have. Thank you for joining us Bill. It has been a truly wonderful experience!

BM: David those are very great questions. I am grateful of you for asking them and grateful of you for thinking about them!



Dave Bonan is an undergraduate at the University of Washington studying atmospheric sciences and applied mathematics.

For a full account of the interview with Bill McKibben and an even deeper discussion on the politicization of climate change, Alex Lenferna's and Bill's insight on the current divest movement, and communicating uncertainty within climate science contact Dave at dbonan@uw.edu.
