

RADICAL PREDICTIONS

Should we fear near-term human extinction? BY TED TAYLOR

Most of us have figured out by now that we are toast: Humanity will be wiped out by an asteroid, supernova, massive volcanic eruptions, global axis shift, some untreatable virus, nuclear war or climate change. Our sun is going supernova. We've seen the disaster movies, read the books and laughed at the cartoons.

But how quickly?

Emeritus natural resources professor Guy McPherson of the University of Arizona lectured in Eugene June 24. He packed the big hall at the Unitarian Universalist Church and sold all his books, including his latest, co-authored with Carolyn Baker, *Extinction Dialogs: How to Live with Death in Mind*.

In his talk, McPherson offered dire, even shocking predictions. He figures the sixth extinction in Earth's geologic history is already under way, we could see massive die-offs of humans and other species in as little as 18 months, and humanity has at best 10 to 20 years. "I could be wrong," he admits.

McPherson accuses climate scientists of "malpractice" for not being candid with the public about "our 99 percent certainty of death." He says: "There is no expiration date stamped on us, but we have triggered events that will lead to our extinction in the not-too-distant future."

"Near-term human extinction" even has an acronym, NTHE, and McPherson is certainly not the first scientist or science writer to say we've damaged our ecosystem too much to fix it. The perfect storm of overpopulation, industrialization, pollution, deforestation, monocrops and pesticides, invasive species, urban sprawl, overfishing, warfare, reliance on fossil fuels, ignorance and corruption (and accompanying bad public policy) have had scientists waving distress flags for decades, even before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* of 1960.

The warnings have been ignored or ridiculed at the international, national, state and even local level, thanks in part to a well-funded, right-wing campaign representing the short-term interests of heavy industry, mining and fossil fuel corporations. A growing number of Americans, a record 40 percent, think the dangers of climate change are exaggerated, according to Gallup polling in recent years.

President Obama has helped Democrats wake up to the seriousness of climate change, but 68 percent of Republicans believe the threat is non-existent or overblown. Science is playing second fiddle to politics.

McPherson is correct that few climate scientists are talking about imminent human extinction, but is it a matter of professional "malpractice" or is the scientific community simply less inclined to radical extrapolation for fear of losing credibility (and grants)? Although McPherson is a scientist, he's not a climate scientist doing field research.

Phil Mote, director of the Oregon Climate Change Research Institute at Oregon State University, is skeptical of McPherson's predictions: "I've been connected to national and international assessments of the state of the science of climate change, and although my colleagues and I are generally very concerned about what challenges climate change is bringing to humankind, no expert that I

The Sixth Extinction, says, "What is clear, and what is beyond dispute, is that we are living in a time of very, very elevated extinction rates, on the order that you would see in a mass extinction, though a mass extinction might take many thousands of years to play out."

What do local climate change activists think about McPherson and his predictions? "I can appreciate the sledgehammer — especially when people with great influence do great harm," says Delaney Pearson of the 350 Eugene Leadership Team. "But his claim that we have *no* chance to change anything for the better — no matter what we do — feels like surrender."

Pearson continues: "I certainly don't think our work is a waste of time, and I'm more than happy to keep on talking and writing and, yes, tweeting about all the ways we might change the world for the better." She says, "For now, I choose Bill McKibben and all the people around me and around the world working so hard to turn this crisis into an amazing opportunity for good."

McKibben is a leading voice for climate action, and he recognizes the threat of global climate catastrophe, but his optimistic book *Hope, Human and Wild* focuses on the many inventive solutions supporting sustainability that he has found around the world.

International journalist and author Dahr Jamail wrote on the nonprofit news site Truth-out.org in December 2014 that "coal will likely overtake oil as the dominant energy source by 2017, and without a major shift away from coal, average global temperatures could rise by 6 degrees Celsius by 2050, leading to devastating climate change. This is dramatically worse than even the dire predictions from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which predicts at least a 5 degree Celsius increase by 2100 as its worst-case scenario."

Jamail adds, "There is nothing to indicate in the political or corporate world that there will be anything like a major shift in policy aimed at dramatically mitigating runaway anthropogenic [human-caused] climate disruption."

Mary DeMocker of 350 Eugene was in the front row at McPherson's talk, and she says: "Until James Hansen or a lot of scientists of his caliber and expertise call it game over, I'm fighting to win and holding onto the thread of hope he offers that it's a closing window, but it's a window nonetheless, and it's still open."

DeMocker adds that McPherson "never mentioned that you can pull carbon *out* of the atmosphere and reduce the 400 ppm to a livable amount. And in that he's doing a profound disservice. It can be done, 7 percent yearly reduction."



ILLUSTRATION BY TRASK BEDORTHA

have read has used language like 'extinction of the human race.' I refer of course to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, U.S. National Climate Assessment and various U.S. National Academy of Sciences reports."

Mote is involved with the IPCC, which won the Nobel Prize in 2007 along with Al Gore for their "efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change."

Elizabeth Kolbert, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning