

CLOSING THE GAP ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Damon Matthews has run the climate models that show where the world is headed if it does not succeed in slowing the warming of the planet. As a scientist at Concordia University in Montreal, his work is intimately bound up in figuring out what needs to happen to avoid potentially dire consequences for the Earth.

And yet he is an optimist on climate change. “The door is still open if we decide to walk through it,” says the professor in Concordia University’s geography, planning and environment department. “Human societies have shown an ability to change dramatically and go off in different directions very quickly.”

But how? Liz Miller, a communications professor at Concordia, hopes to inspire local communities to head in new directions. Her “collaborative documentary,” Hands On, weaves together the stories of women on four continents who are fighting climate change.

“Right now my biggest concern is about closing the gap,” she says. “Climate change is an incredibly complex issue. How do we translate knowledge into new values, new behaviours, new ways of being in the world? How do we go about creating change in very small ways?”

Professor Miller and Professor Matthews, along with Peter Stoett, a political science professor at Concordia, will be speaking at the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa on April 28 in an event sponsored by Concordia, in co-operation with The Walrus magazine. The event is called The Walrus Talks Climate.

The work of all three focusses on shrinking the gap between the global and the local, and between rhetoric and actual change.

Professor Stoett says that international agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol, which is to feature a second phase of commitments next year, need to take into account the effects on



A screen grab from Liz Miller's documentary Hands On, created by animator Eva Cvijanovic, depicting the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline from Alberta's oil sands to Kitimat, B.C.

local communities. “We have to be very careful that in the rush to try to do something positive about climate change we aren’t hurting people in the process. In particular, I mean the most vulnerable people, low-income people who, if we’re not careful, might end up paying the price.”

For instance, keeping people out of traditional hunting or fishing areas, whether to address climate change or biodiversity, would worsen poverty, he says. International agreements need to ensure they have local legitimacy, says Professor Stoett, who is director of the Loyola Sustainability Research Centre at Concordia. (The centre’s two focuses are climate change and biodiversity.)

“The Arctic communities in Canada will be paying the price that climate change is exacting on those societies because their habitat is changing so rapidly. Are we going to have plans in place to make sure that they’re part of the process trying to adapt to this and they’re not just viewed as part of the problem?”

Prof Miller brings a similar concern for local communities, trying to connect them through storytelling. As in her previous work, including a media project in which refugee youth videotaped their own stories, she knits together the work of five female directors set in Canada, Norway, Kenya and India, featuring women working with aboriginal communities, challenging pipelines and opposing Arctic oil exploration.

“There are new ways of making documentaries. Crowd-sourcing is one. And these collaborative models mean that we can tap into networks and avoid production models that create a huge carbon footprint by requiring people to fly all over the world.”

Hands On, developed through the International Association of Women in Television and Radio, which has United Nations consultative status, brings a global issue home in a way people can relate to. “The local initiatives presented in the film inspire us despite what often feels like an overwhelming issue.

The truth is we’re all impacted by one other so we cannot address this issue on our own.”

Five years ago, the global community agreed in Copenhagen to try to limit total warming to two degrees Celsius above the level when the Industrial Revolution began in the 1800s. Temperatures were already up nearly one degree when that agreement was made. If the world is to stay within the two-degree target, it will mean “dramatic changes in how we use fossil fuels,” Professor Matthews says. “It means ultimately weaning global society off fossil fuels altogether.”

Change will be required at the global, national and local levels. And individuals will need to take responsibility for how their own actions contribute to global warming, the professors say.

“Eventually we’ll be playing in the theatre of hard choices,” Prof. Stoett says. He still holds out hope, though, that small but widespread changes in behaviour can have a large cumulative impact. “If everyone just changed a little bit we’d all be

much better off in the long run.” He says that instead of driving an SUV, he drives a hybrid, and he’s trying to minimize his air travel by attending fewer conferences.

Professor Matthews is attempting to refine, through his research, the global two per cent target to take into account uncertainties around how emissions affect climate. And he has hope the world will one day take charge of the problem of global warming. “As soon as someone figures out how to really make a profit on renewable energy it’s going to take off. Look at computers and cell phone technology — within a few decades we’ve gone from zero to everybody using this technology. We need that kind of rapid societal transformation and technological development. It’s a question of the will to go off in that direction instead of following the current path.”

To get your tickets for the Concordia-Walrus talk on climate, visit concordia.ca/cutalks. Spaces are limited.

JUST TALKING The theatre of hard choices

Canada and the rest of the world need to face up to the problems that fossil-fuel dependency is causing for the planet, and soon, before extreme weather patterns become the norm, three Concordia University professors say

Q: What do international institutions need to keep in mind when addressing climate change?



Peter: No matter how glitzy or complicated some proposed solution looks, if it doesn’t have buy-in at the local level it is not going to be effective. The key word is legitimacy. You’ve got to have legitimacy among the people who are going to be living with the consequences of this. If they’re not allowed to hunt a certain mammal or fish a certain species anymore, they’ve got to understand why that’s the case. And in some cases if it’s possible, they’re going to have to be compensated.

Q: What contribution would you like to see from ordinary people in the fight against global warming?

Peter: People have to think this through. It sounds rather banal but it’s true. What am I doing? Am I destroying the coral reefs every time I drive my SUV? Indirectly I’m contributing to that problem. So I have to think twice about whether I drive that SUV.

Q: That doesn’t seem to be happening much today.

Peter: Eventually we’ll be playing in the theatre of hard choices. Right now we still get away with this. I’m aware of what’s happening with all the new natural gas and shale oil but eventually oil will become more and more difficult to obtain. It already is, if you look at the lengths we’re going to in the oil sands. The price of oil might go up significantly and that will affect food prices, so people will start to make these connections more intimately.

Peter Stoett is a political science professor at Concordia University and director of the university’s Loyola Sustainability Research Centre.

Q: How is Canada doing at addressing climate change?

Damon: Pretty horrifically. I’d say provincially there are good spots and bad spots. Federally there’s still no leadership on trying to decrease Canada’s carbon emissions. There are some targets. They’re not consistent with any kind of reasonable climate target, as far as I’m concerned.

Q: Is global warming the cause of the catastrophic floods, tsunamis and hurricanes we’ve seen in the past few years, in Canada or abroad?

Damon: You can never unambiguously attribute any one weather event to anything. That’s the nature of weather. Every weather event that occurs right now is occurring in the context of global warming. You can point to trends and most of the trends we’re seeing in patterns of extreme weather are consistent with what is expected in a warming climate.

Q: What do you say to people who worry about losing the wealth benefit from oil in this country?

Damon: It’s a completely short-sighted perspective on the issue. Yes, there’s a lot of oil in Alberta and given the current economy and the current price of oil that’s a potential source of profit. This is the world in which we don’t really believe in global warming or we don’t take it all that seriously or we decide that we’re just going to pretend that it’s not going on for a little while and make what money we can. Ultimately we have to decide we’re going to stop exploiting this particular resource and we’re going to develop other energy resources that in the long term will be equally profitable.

Damon Matthews, a professor in Concordia University’s geography department, was a contributing author to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.



Q: Could you explain your participatory approach to documentary-making, with multiple storytellers?

Liz: Participatory media is something that I’ve practiced over the last 20 years. For the last seven years I led a program with refugee youth and the idea was that, rather than develop a film as an auteur documentary filmmaker, I taught them how use media equipment to tell their own stories. The resulting collaboration is remarkable, more than any one of us might have developed on our own.

Q: What challenges does this collaborative approach create for you?

Liz: If I curate a documentary project, I’m necessarily going to have many different perspectives and aesthetics in one piece. So one challenge is how to curate a coherent aesthetic vision. It’s risky and you have to give over a bit of aesthetic control; but in exchange you gain a perspective you might never arrive at on your own.

Q: Why the focus on women?

Liz: If we don’t listen to and feature the experience of women who are finding ways to confront climate change we’re missing a key perspective in addressing this issue. Climate change impacts women and men differently.

Q: What is your message in weaving together individual stories from around the world?

Liz: The way forward is by activating networks. A film in itself isn’t going to change the world but a film that’s placed strategically with non-profit organizations who can use it to inspire the people they’re working with, can go a long way.

Liz Miller, a professor in Concordia University’s communications studies department, is an independent documentary videomaker and trans-media artist whose work connects individuals across cultures.

