Climate challenged: Our need to change

Marg O'Brien

Marg O'Brien offers two papers on climate change and our need to change and where to focus our efforts

As an earlier trained clinical psychologist Marg moved into environmental work 30 years ago. In consulting and research roles, she has worked at the people-environment interface with an emphasis on building community resilience and progressing sustainable lifestyles. Marg is a member of the Society's Climate Psychology Taskforce where her interest is in ensuring that local and central government understand and use the expertise psychologists can bring in progressing the country's transition to sustainability.

At the 2014 NZ Psychological Society Annual Conference the AGM passed a remit on the Society's responsibility on climate change and sustainability issues. This year the essence of the remit was encapsulated in the Society's Position Statement on Environmental Wellbeing and Responsibility to Society[1]. To support this work, the NZPsS Climate Psychology Taskforce convened a Psychology for a Sustainable Future Symposium at the 2018 Jubilee Conference in Auckland.

Essentially, the Society has acknowledged the profound impact that humans are having on the environment and the urgent need for us to work to counter the detrimental effects that are anticipated on human health and well-being.[2] Recognized are the needs to strengthen our capacity as practitioners to address a climate turbulent future; promote a wider understanding of the human and psychological dimensions of sustainability and particularly, global climate change; track and reduce the Society's own ecological footprint; and work with government and political organisations to ensure they understand the expertise that the discipline can offer re human adaptation, mitigation and transformation efforts in response to sustainability and climate disturbance issues.

Climate change, of course, is not the only factor undermining sustainability, but no other phenomenon carries such risks to life on the planet. Climate change interacts and exacerbates many other issues critical to environmental integrity and/or human well-being, e.g. biodiversity loss, ocean acidification and food security…. to name but a few. Our challenge is to acknowledge the new responsibilities this brings to the profession: to understand the psychology behind the destructive role that humans have had in precipitating these events; determine what can and needs to be done to address this situation, and further, to work facilitating the transition to a more sustainable way of being.

In a nutshell, we are running out of time. There is an urgent need for us to slow down global warming and reduce risk by reducing emissions.

The 2013 report on the state of our global climate conditions from the United Nations body, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), indicates that climate change is getting worse and man is the main cause[3]. Further, they stressed the importance of maintaining global warming below the 2ºC mark. This is widely considered to be the dividing line between warming which is just about tolerable and that which is dangerous.

Figure 1[4] depicts the projected warming relative to high and low growth emission scenarios.

Specifically, a budget has been calculated - to have a two-thirds chance of keeping global warming below 2ºC "will require cumulative CO2 emissions from all anthropogenic

1 See http://www.psychology.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/NZPsS-2018-Statement-on-Environmental-Wellbeing-and-Responsibility-to-Society-Reviewed-Final-Version-20-April-2018-1.pdf

2 See also https://royalsociety.org.nz/assets/documents/Report-Human-Health-Impacts-of-Climate-Change-for-New-Zealand-Oct-2017.pdf and MANNING, C. & CLAYTON, S. 2018. 9 - Threats to mental health and wellbeing associated with climate change. Psychology and Climate Change. Academic Press.

3 The points made in this paragraph are drawn from http://www.economist.com/blogs/babbage/2013/09/ipcc-climate-change-report

4 From the NASA Earth Observatory on IPCC https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Features/GlobalWarming/page5.php

sources to stay [below] about 1,000 [trillion tonnes]". In 2011, the world had already gone through just over half that amount (531 trillion tonnes).

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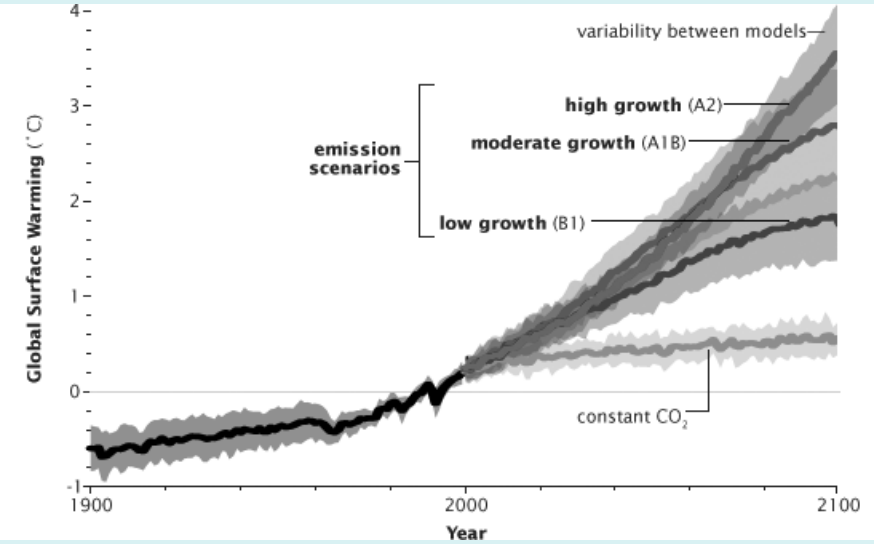
Figure 1: Projected global surface warming relative to growth emission scenarios



In 2015, when I first presented this information at the NZPsS Conference, the rate of greenhouse-gas emissions (through the burning of fossil fuels, cement production, land use change, etc.), meant that the rest of the budget would be spent before 2040.

However, the IPCC report was released prior to the events at COP21[5] held in December 2015. This is where, via the Paris Agreement, the international community agreed not only to limit temperature rise to below 2°C but also to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C. We are already at 1.1°C above pre-industrial levels and estimates indicate that, if we maintain present day emission rates, we have a window of opportunity of 7-10 years to keep global warming to 1.5°C and 15-20 years to keep it at 2°C[6].

a move to what we call a decarbonised economy, one in which we move to low carbon energy sources (e.g. wind, solar and hydro-power). This will ensure that the world's oil and coal sources stay in the ground, or if used, be used by developing countries to ensure an equitable starting place in their drive for a prosperous future. As Prof Chris Ryan from Melbourne[7] has discussed, a paradigm change is needed – the old story based on human progress enabled by fossil fuels no longer works. We need a new story to help shape our lives.

We are already beginning to experience extreme environmental changes so why is responding to this reality being so resisted?

Implicitly, our personal values, our worldviews and ideological frameworks – our shared stories provide us with direction on how we shall live (Corner and Groves, 2014, Korten, 2015). Challenged personally and professionally as we now find ourselves, we will need to live differently, and we need a different story to take effect. But it is more than we as individuals reducing energy usage or consumption patterns or carbon footprint. It is a story that will need to acknowledge our interdependence with one another and with our planet. Taking on the responsibilities outlined in the Society's Position Statement for social and environmental well-being will be part of our new professional story. This is our ultimate climate challenge. Business as usual is not an option.

5 COP21 was the 21st yearly session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

6 Personal communication 17th May, 2018 from Prof James Renwick, Victoria University, Wellington

7 From a 2011 seminar at VEIL: Victorian Eco innovation Lab, Melbourne, Australia

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