

Thoughts on 100 volumes of *Climatic Change*

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When I was first approached to write something for volume 100 about what we had learned since number 1 of volume 1 appeared in March of 1977, I thought that I might write something about progress in developing a common language—i.e., something about how members of the various research communities that have something to say about climate change had emerged from the “Canadian haze” of attempting to do interdisciplinary research by learning each others’ languages and respecting each others’ perspectives.¹ I intended to quote the prescript from Malone and Yohe (1992) published in a rival (and much younger) journal. That paper reported on the topic of an international conference that we had hosted in Interlaken, Switzerland, the week after the Second World Climate Conference had completed its work in Geneva. We devoted the text of the paper to a discussion of a regional approach to assessment that could incorporate “diverse inputs from a wide range of disciplines and professions” (p. 101); but we began with a little preliminary story that highlights the prerequisite of communication in building such an assessment:

I met three cats on my first day in Interlaken. To the first, I said ‘hello’, but it ran off into the nearest bush. To the second, remembering that I was in Switzerland, I said ‘guten tag’ and it marched right over to me for a minute of vigorous ear scratching. Encouraged by my success, I repeated the greeting to the third cat, only to be rebuffed by a haughty upward tilt of the head. I tried again, this time with a hesitant ‘bonjour’, and I was rewarded by a quick and playful prance to my outstretched hand and several minutes of chasing leaves. When I wrote home to my family that night, I related the story in considerably more detail, and I wondered ‘How do these Swiss cats communicate with one another?’ How, indeed? (p. 101)

¹To complete this vague reference, see Vichers and Munn (1977).

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Of course, the Interlaken cats must have developed a common language born of mutual interest and respect for individual boundaries. Returning to interdisciplinary research, I would then have pointed out in greater detail that *Climatic Change* has, for the past 30+ years, been a major mechanism through which the various research communities listed on its masthead have come to develop a common language born of mutual concern for the climate and a growing respect for disciplinary boundaries and alternative perspectives.

Those details will have to wait, however, because I have chosen a different metaphor. I am writing this in the wake of what has come to be called “climate-gate”—the saga of the purloined e-mail from the Climate Research Unit of the University of East Anglia and the extraordinary attention that a few personal communications between some prominent scientists had attracted.² I will not be discussing the e-mail, their illegal dissemination, or their implications for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. I will, instead, try use the events to shed light on what may be *Climatic Change*’s largest contribution to interdisciplinary research into climate change. It is a contribution that goes well beyond simply facilitating communication.

To that end, it seems to me that a productive interdisciplinary research community is like a really good athletic team; those of you who know me will not be surprised that I have the women’s basketball team from the University of Connecticut in mind. Nearly two decades of extraordinary success at the highest level of NCAA competition has illuminated a number of lessons that can be applied directly to interdisciplinary research (even if it is decentralized to the point of being conducted by independent scholars scattered all around the world). To be part of a successful team, each member must understand the overall approach to every season. These are approaches that change from year to year as coaches anticipate the challenges of the forthcoming schedule and how they might converge during the year’s culminating tournament (otherwise known as the “final four”). Really good coaches break these approaches down to such a degree that each player is given a unique role and set of responsibilities that are designed to take advantage of her respective strengths and compensate for the weaknesses in the skills of other teammates. Each member of the team must therefore fully comprehend her role in both regards; and she must buy into the belief that the entire year will break down for the entire team if she does not live up to her specific responsibilities day in and day out. Indeed, at UCONN, this obligation is felt on every single possession of every single game. In short, each team member must understand that the integrity of the team concept is essential for success from game to game and from season to season. Each player’s role, in short, depends on maintaining discipline and not overreaching beyond the specified responsibilities upon which the team depends.

Interdisciplinary research is much the same. We rely on each other. We are all consumers of others’ work; and we all hope that our work will be subsequently used by others. We count on each other and so the integrity of each piece of scholarship

²See BBC New archive for December 4, 2009 and Eli Kintisch’s report in the December 4, 2009 issue of *Science* (p. 1329) for some contemporaneous coverage of the events as they unfolded.

is essential. We have long understood our individual responsibilities in this regard, but “climate-gate” has taught us that we are all tied together. The integrity of each and every one of us is tied to the integrity of everyone else. If one bit of work is questioned, then all of our work comes under scrutiny. It follows that we must strive to protect the integrity of our communal work in everything we do—i.e., every single possession in every single game.

Maintaining integrity in this case does not mean that we must always be right. Imposing such a high bar would create immediate paralysis; nobody would publish anything for fear of having made a mistake. Our understanding of complex issues like climate change is forever evolving, and so integrity begins with the truth that anything we write is a snapshot of what we know at that point in time. In the end, integrity in this context simply means that we all must always be honest *skeptics* with a small “s”. We must constantly question. We must admit when we are wrong. We must publish results even when we wish that they had gone the other way. We must understand uncertainty and the limits of statistical inference, and we must insist that our readers do, as well (or instruct them to the best of our abilities). We must, in other words, never overreach.

For most players, overreaching is a problem because it leads to reduced concentration on the task at hand and perhaps critical failures in fulfilling specific responsibilities upon which other teammates rely. Every really successful team has a star or two, of course—players like Diana Taurasi at the University of Connecticut. These are players who can overreach from time to time because they are so good that they can fulfill all of their responsibilities completely and still have time to do other things. Diana used to bounce around on defense, for example, filling passing lanes and causing chaos for the opposing team. In doing so, she would leave her assigned player unguarded, but the coaches finally stopped complaining. With a combination of extraordinary vision, anticipation and quickness, she always seemed to get back to her player before the ball arrived in the event that the opposing team caught on to her “meandering” approach to defense and tried to take advantage.

I will leave it to you to decide who among us has been such a star for the interdisciplinary climate change research community over the past three decades or so. I will keep my thoughts on that subject to myself, emphasizing instead the point of my team metaphor one more time. Integrity is our most important asset; it cannot be squandered because we can never get it back. It is the foundation upon which anything we might want to try to accomplish in support of international negotiations, international or national assessments, or using effective adaptation and mitigation initiatives to sustain progress toward Millennium Development Goals. It is the foundation of our contributing to knowledge by deconstructing the roles of risk, equity, efficiency, sustainability, and resilience in the framing the policy debates. It is the foundation of constructively inserting our evolving understanding of natural science and changing uncertainties into iterative decision processes. It was all of these things in 1977. It is in 2010. And it will be in 2043.

To my mind, *Climatic Change* has been a bastion of that integrity since its inception in 1977. Through the persistent and provocative leadership of Stephen Schneider, *Climatic Change* has imposed that standard time after time to support us as we work together to advance knowledge in defense of the planet and its inhabitants.

References

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