

Eleven thousand scientists warn of climate emergency

By Daniel de Vries
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“Scientists have a moral obligation to clearly warn humanity of any catastrophic threat and ‘tell it like it is.’ We declare, with more than 11,000 scientist signatories from around the world, clearly and unequivocally that planet Earth is facing a climate emergency,” a remarkable paper published last week in the scientific journal *BioScience* began.

The assertion of a planetary emergency, endorsed by scientists in 153 countries, came on the anniversary of the first official government-sponsored international climate change conference in 1979 in Geneva, Switzerland. “Despite 40 years of global climate negotiations,” the paper noted, “with few exceptions, we have generally conducted business as usual and have largely failed to address this predicament.”

“The climate crisis has arrived and is accelerating faster than most scientists expected,” the report warned. “It is more severe than anticipated, threatening natural ecosystems and the fate of humanity.”

“Especially worrisome, are potential irreversible climate tipping points and nature’s reinforcing feedbacks that could lead to a catastrophic ‘hothouse Earth,’ well beyond the control of humans. These climate chain reactions could cause significant disruptions to ecosystems, society, and economies, potentially making large areas of Earth uninhabitable.”

This is far from the first time scientists have warned of the dangers of climate change. In fact, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which emerged from the process begun in Geneva, has issued five comprehensive global assessments documenting severe impacts already occurring and projections of potentially catastrophic ones to come.

The latest warning was championed by lead author Bill Ripple, an ecologist at Oregon State University, and collaborators from the University of Sydney,

University of Cape Town and Tufts University, under the auspices of the newly formed Alliance of World Scientists.

Its language and urgency are a significant departure from previous assessments. It marks the first time broad sections of scientists have endorsed a straightforward declaration of emergency, moving beyond the sometimes cautious language and emphasis on characterizing uncertainty in previous discourse.

The shift is reflection of the growing disconnect between the scientific understanding of the consequences of climate change and a political and economic system proving itself unwilling and unable to address it. A wide consensus of scientists has concluded not only that climate change is real, but that the world is on a path towards catastrophe. At this point, nothing short of “transformative change” will do.

After decades of negotiations, the international response to the climate crisis has failed to go beyond the series of voluntary pledges memorialized in the Paris Agreement of 2015, which, even if achieved, would fail to avert a planetary disaster. Yet even these voluntary targets from Paris went too far for the leaders of the world’s largest economy. A day before the emergency declaration of scientists, the Trump administration formally announced its withdrawal from the Paris accords.

The *BioScience* paper identifies metrics, utilizing data over the past 40 years, that are intended to clearly communicate the interaction between humanity and climate change. These metrics go beyond traditional emphasis on rising surface temperatures, tracking in addition the worrying trends in extreme weather, land use changes, wildfire burn area, ocean heat content and chemistry changes, along with population and

economic indicators.

The authors outline several areas for immediate action, including a rapid shift to renewable energy, protection of the earth's ecosystems, prioritizing economic equality over growth, and addressing population growth through comprehensive access to family planning services and universal primary and secondary education.

As the past 40 years has demonstrated, no amount of warning, however dire, will be enough to implement these changes, even in the face of impending disaster, without a struggle to overturn the capitalist economic and social basis upon which all the key decisions are made.

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