

Talking about Climate Change

By John Benson

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1. Introduction

This will be a very short post (for your author), about a book that I just completed. This book is on a subject that I frequently read and write about: climate change. This book is crammed full of facts and references about scientists' understanding of this human-caused effect, but its main subject is about communicating (mainly talking) with various types of people about climate change, its causes and mitigation. The book was a long read for me (probably about two weeks), because this main subject was new for me. When I typically read a book on climate change, I'm covering much ground that I have travelled before, and I can zip through new information fairly quickly (I use Post-it Notes to book-mark interesting new information). Although I did book-mark this one, I didn't try to do the same with the "talking..." subjects, because I rarely talk, I mostly just write.

2. Saving Us

This book is referenced below with the link to the Amazon website.¹ The main body of this book is 245 pages long. Its price was \$20.00 on Amazon as I'm writing this – check the reference link below for your current price.

2.1. Author

Katharine Hayhoe is a climate scientist and chief scientist for The Nature Conservancy. She is also the Endowed Professor in Public Policy and Public Law and Paul W. Horn Distinguished Professor at Texas Tech University. She has been named a United Nations Champion of the Earth and one of Time's 100 Most Influential People, and serves as the climate ambassador for the World Evangelical Alliance. Katharine was a lead author for the US Second, Third, and Fourth National Climate Assessments, hosts the PBS digital series Global Weirding, and has written for The New York Times. Her TED Talk "The Most Important Thing You Can Do to Fight Climate Change: Talk About It" has been viewed over 5 million times. She has a BSc in physics and astronomy from the University of Toronto and an MS and a PhD in atmospheric science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

For the record, your author (John) graduated from Texas Tech (BSEE, 1975), and my parents lived in Lubbock for many years, where Texas Tech is and where Ms. Hayhoe lives currently.

Ms. Hayhoe also makes a point to work her Christian Religion into this book, and uses her religion as part of her approach in talking to people about climate change.

2.2. Excerpt

I opened the book at random, and leafed through a few pages before I found the following excerpt – a short section. Many of the examples of the book involve conversations between Ms. Hayhoe and other people. This one was a bit different.

¹ Katharine Hayhoe, "Saving Us," Simon & Schuster, Copyright 2021 by Katharine Hayhoe, <https://www.amazon.com/Saving-Us-Climate-Scientists-Healing/dp/1982143835>

HUMANS ARE THE BIGGEST UNCERTAINTY²

The concept that we have a choice to make is surprisingly new. Back in the 1990s, nearly all regional and sectoral climate assessments treated climate impacts as essentially inevitable. They were just looking ahead to see what was going to happen, so people could prepare. By doing so, they cast humans as the archetypal victim in an old western, tied to the tracks while the locomotive steamed around the corner. There's no altering the speed of the train, this metaphor suggested, but if you could see it coming at least you could prepare to minimize the impact.

This view isn't just unhelpful – it's wrong. Why? If disaster isn't inevitable, and we can do something about it, understanding the difference our choices make becomes absolutely critical. This simple concept is the key to everything I do, and everything I talk about in this book.

What are our choices? As John Holdren, senior science advisor to President Obama,³ declared in his 2008 address to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, “we have three of them. We can reduce the heat-trapping gas emissions that are causing climate to change; we can build resilience and prepare to adapt to the changes that we can't avoid; or we can suffer. “We're going to do some of each;” he said. “The question is what the mix is going to be. The more mitigation we do, the less adaptation will be required, and the less suffering there will be.”

To correct the train metaphor, we humans are actually on the locomotive's footplate, with our hand on the throttle. The train is heading for a bridge that's down. We can assume protective positions to ride out the crash, but we can also stop accelerating (stop increasing our emissions) and hit the brakes (decrease our emissions) to minimize the damage. We'll have a lot better chance of surviving, the more we do.

So, while localized information on how impacts affect us helps people understand why climate change matters, it's essential to pair this information with an understanding of how our actions matter, how impacts depend on the carbon emissions we produce. This information is time sensitive: it presents us with a choice to make now. If we don't act, that in and of itself is also a choice; and it's one that makes the worst-case scenario, with all of its attendant suffering, virtually inevitable.

We humans are the greatest uncertainty in the climate system.

² Saving Us by Katharine Hayhoe, pages 112 and 113.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Holdren