Viewpoint

Communicating climate change: an editorial round-up

By the end of April, a report by UK Climate Impact Projections (UKCP09) will give us much food for thought on the latest warming predictions. In the meantime, a flurry of comment and letters has reached us on this topic, so this seems a good opportunity to summarize these before they may be overtaken by events.

The Viewpoint by Simon Keeling in our February issue (Keeling, 2009) quickly led to three letters. Before coming to these, it is worth noting that on 11 February, the Met Office (2009a) issued a press release – *Stop misleading climate claims* – which, quite independently, was on the same lines as that Viewpoint. Keeling had asked:

> *Could we be in danger of raising the public's understanding of climate change to a level beyond that of the current science?*

In the press release, Dr Vicky Pope, Met Office Head of Climate Change, called on scientists and the media to 'rein in' some of their assertions about climate change. She stated:

> *News headlines vie for attention and it is easy for scientists to grab this attention by linking climate change to the latest extreme weather event or apocalyptic prediction. But in doing so, the public perception of climate change can be distorted.*

Of the three letters, one by Ian Strangeways, a former *Weather* Board member, stated:

> *I couldn't agree more with the points Simon made and it was good to see it said. And good also that the Editor and Editorial Board supported its publication.*

Reader Terry Evans took the diametrically opposite view:

> *It is disturbing to read yet another article in* Weather *warning of the dangers of scientists releasing information on a gullible public. One must indeed start questioning what are* Weather's *own views on global warming and wondering whether they and the authors of these articles are really climate change sceptics dressed up in sheep's clothing.*

Andrew Russell (University of Manchester) had a different point to make about this Viewpoint. He agreed that:

> *Public understanding of climate change is an important topic and I think it should be considered by all of us with a professional interest in the subject.*

However, he referred to Channel 4's screening of *The Great Global Warming Swindle* (first broadcast in March 2007). Following many complaints about this documentary, the Office of Communication (Ofcom) responded that, whilst news programmes must be reported with 'due accuracy', there is no such requirement for factual programmes – only whether such programmes may mislead the audience 'with the result that harm and/or offence was likely to be caused'. Ofcom (2008) concluded that Channel 4 did not breach the code as regards factual accuracy. Dr Russell comments that this ruling appears

> *[…] to make the assumption that presenting misinformation about climate change is not harmful, which – given the potential consequences of delaying action – is hard to justify. It seems, therefore, that broadcasters have the freedom to screen polemic material in the guise of factual programming. This being the case, it is important that scientists asked to contribute to any such programmes are careful to ascertain the credibility and background of the people producing them.*

The thoughts of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, as reported in Weather in My Life (Hardaker, 2008), on this subject concerned reader Andrew Harris. He wrote that Prince Charles

> *[…] warns against attributing any particular severe weather event to this cause (global warming). But then he falls into his own trap, and mentions the disasters of Katrina, Boscastle and Sheffield (flooding) as if they were definitely due to climate change. In reality, of course, it is not possible to say any such thing.* (Editor's note: in our Special Issue on the summer of 2007 (Marsh, 2008), it was stated that this summer 'was a very singular episode, and does not constitute an element of any clear emerging pattern consistent with currently favoured climate change scenarios'.)

Harris continued:

> *Prince Charles makes many claims that the frequency of severe weather events is increasing. He says the* 'frequency and ferocity' *of hurricanes is increasing; that* 'weather patterns generally are more extreme - with longer droughts and more frequent severe floods'; *and that Caribbean* 'weather patterns are breaking down and the dry season is no longer dry'. *In my opinion all of these statements could be challenged…I think it is most unfortunate that opinion formers like Prince Charles should make such emotionally charged statements about what is at best a highly complex subject.*

And so we await the most up-to-date report on this subject (we plan to have an article from UKCP09 in our June issue). As if anticipating its likely tenor, another Met Office (2009b) press release, issued on 15 February – *Early action on climate change needed* – referred to:

> *[…] claims by Professor Chris Field that climate change 'will be beyond anything' predicted. It has been clear for some time that greenhouse gas emissions have been accelerating at a rate higher than even the worst-case emissions scenarios used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in the 2007 report. Overall global emissions continue to rise at a rate of 1% per year… Research from the Met Office Hadley Centre has shown that by delaying action on carbon emissions there is a significant risk of larger increases in*

temperature over those from taking early action. This will lead to a significant risk of dangerous impacts to our environment, society and economy.

Indeed, the press release dated 11 February (Met Office, 2009a) had concluded with the statement:

Our concerns about climate change arise from the scientific evidence that humanity's activities are leading to changes in our climate. The scientific evidence is overwhelming.

The basic science of this subject is clear; the issues arising and how we react to them are much less straightforward and will continue to be debated. Terry Evans finished his letter by stating:

Please give the public the best information available and let them make their own decisions.

That is what we endeavour to do in these pages, and this was the thinking behind Simon Keeling's Viewpoint (which was, of course, his own viewpoint and does not necessarily represent those of the Editor or *Weather* Board Members). We welcome further well-argued comment on this theme – once we have all thoroughly ingested the latest report.

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Meeting report

Weather and photography

Weather is photographed for two main reasons: scientific and aesthetic. Both were well represented at this Saturday meeting, held on 22 November 2008 in the Mechanical Engineering Building of Imperial College London.

The previous meeting on this subject was arranged by the Society as long ago as May 1979, but we were taken back in time much further by *Malcolm Walker*, the first speaker and Chairman of the Society's Special Interest Group for the History of Meteorology and Physical Oceanography, who reviewed the pre-1930 work of pioneering weather photographers. Apart from discussing the well-known collections of Clayden, Cave and Clarke, he drew attention to the important role photographs played in the 1880s and 1890s in clarifying cloud types, leading to the publication of the first international cloud atlas in 1896. It was also astonishing to hear that the earliest known photograph of lightning was taken in 1847.

Storm Dunlop, author of many books on the weather and astronomy, gave us much useful information based on his vast experience. He reminded us of the need for good composition, of possible trouble with variations in both contrast and polarization across the scene, and of the need to keep the horizon level. When using a digital camera, ensure the date and time are set correctly. He suggested taking stereo shots by moving quickly between two positions, or from a moving car or aeroplane. But, above all, always have a camera on stand-by!

If you are thinking of submitting pictures to *Weather* or to the Society's calendar then *George Anderson*, the magazine's photograph editor, had many useful tips. Magazine covers are portrait format and A4 size so they require greater definition compared with the usual landscape format for inside pictures. Slides and prints are still acceptable. Most photographs benefit from careful cropping, and those of high definition might be better sent by CD than by email. Remember to provide details of the subject illustrated, the date and time, and copyright information. All photos retained go into a database from which they may be selected in coming months.

We were impressed with the examples of crashing waves, lightning and tornadoes shown by *Roger Coulam*, a professional landscape photographer. He emphasized the value of the 'golden hour' after sunrise and before sunset, in providing dramatic side-lighting. He also encouraged planning – getting to know your location by frequent visits, and getting to know what weather to expect – so that you can be in the right place at the right time to catch what may be only a fleeting subject.

Gavin Pretor-Pinney, founder of the Cloud Appreciation Society – which has more than 30 000 members worldwide – clearly showed us that there is more to be seen in the sky than indicators of atmospheric motion. Members see all manner of shapes, some that brought gales of laughter to the audience – Salvador Dali, a pterodactyl and even the grim reaper! He wondered why elephants seemed to dominate. We now have reason to look differently at the sky.

Three speakers then gave us examples of their weather photography – *Stephen Burt*, organizer of the meeting and contributor to *Weather* and to the Society's calendar; *John Mason*, a freelance geologist who goes storm-chasing in mid-Wales; and *Richard Griffith*, a semi-professional photographer whose aviation pictures had a good example of wing-tip trails from the Red Arrows.

This meeting provided an opportunity to exchange advice on the taking of attractive and informative weather photographs. We were advised and entertained as well as encouraged to submit for publication, particularly to *Weather* and to the Society's calendar. At the end, it was suggested by a member of the audience that a future meeting could specialize in time-lapse photography. That would certainly emphasize how dynamic clouds can be.

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