

Cathy Becker

Environmental Film Series: Before the Flood

Tuesday, January 31, 2017, 7 to 9 p.m.

Room 130, Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering and Chemistry (CBEC) Building
151 W. Woodruff Ave.

I didn't get a chance to see [Before the Flood](#) when it first came out in fall of last year, so I took the opportunity to go when it was shown on campus. Although I already knew most of what the film covered, it was an excellent exploration of the issues around climate change – the causes, the effects, and the solutions. Leonardo DiCaprio filmed it over the course of three years, exploring not just the science but the politics as to why this problem has not been solved yet.

Climate change has been a central issue of concern for me for probably as long as it took DiCaprio to make this film. I've taken classes and participated in numerous discussion groups on the topic. I've really wanted to understand the many facets of this issue because I wanted to answer for myself: Do we have a chance to survive? I went into study of the issue pretty freaked out and extremely scared. But the more I learned, the more I realized it is highly solvable.

The problem with climate change isn't the science or the solutions. It's the politics of getting those solutions enacted. Our campaign finance laws have essentially turned our political system into an oligarchy, according to [studies in political science](#). Rulings such as Citizens United and McCutcheon allow corporations and billionaires to essentially buy politicians – and no corporation makes more profits and has more billionaires than those in the oil industry.

Fortunately there are several dynamics working in our favor. First, solar and wind energy are becoming so cheap that businesses are starting to switch to renewable energy and energy efficiency themselves, with no prodding from government. Several large corporations such as Amazon, Apple and Facebook want to power all their data centers on 100% renewables. Elon Musk's affordable Tesla, home batteries, and gigafactories are all very positive developments.

Second, even if the United States is not taking action, other countries are. A lot of Americans think China is the problem, and they do emit more carbon than we do, mainly because their population is three times as large, and their factories make a lot of the stuff we consume. However, [China is](#) shutting down coal mines and coal plants, starting a nationwide cap-and-trade program, switching to EVs and hybrids, investing heavily in solar and wind energy, and building high-speed rail, among other things. They plan to be at 20% renewable energy by 2030.

Third, even if our politicians are listening more to the 1% than the 99%, the fact is that the [majority of people](#) in the United States believe climate change is real and that we ought to be doing something about it. Even [among Trump voters](#), the majority support renewable energy. Clean air and clean water are pretty popular, and people get really upset if they are taken away. Eventually politicians will have to do what people want, or they will be voted out.

One thing that was a little surreal about watching Before the Flood now as opposed to when it first came out is that now we not only know the results of the 2016 election, but we are living it. Trump has nominated a cabinet full of climate deniers, removed all information about climate change from the EPA website, told federal employees they can't talk about climate change on social media, issued executive memoranda to move forward with the Dakota Access and Keystone pipelines, and threatened to leave the Paris Climate Agreement.

It was sad to see DiCaprio's interview with President Obama in the film. Obama has done more than any previous president to deal with climate change – without Obama, we would not have gotten the [2014 agreement with China](#) that paved the way for almost 200 countries to sign the Paris Agreement a year later. Yet Obama's approach to climate change was maddeningly incremental and not nearly enough to deal with the problem at hand. He also did other things to undermine his legacy as an environmental leader. Under Obama, for example, we saw the [greatest expansion](#) of drilling and fracking of any president in history.

Still, now we have to deal with Trump, who has called climate change a hoax and effectively made a pledge to destroy the planet by removing any and all common-sense regulations regarding drilling, mining, and fracking so that ever higher levels of carbon can be burned. It's absolutely insane, and it doesn't even feel real. It feels like we are in some sort of dystopian movie, and like one day we will wake up to find it was all just a bad dream. Except it is real.

One thing that gives me hope is the massive resistance movement that Trump has spawned. I've been a climate activist for the past three years, and an animal advocate for five years before that. I would have given anything to get the kind of crowds out marching in resistance to Trump as we had at the women's marches in DC and around the country. Having 5.3 million people protesting is no joke. People are more awake now than at any time in my living memory.

I went to the women's march in DC and was heartened to see a lot of signs about climate. The climate cause intersects with so many other causes. Climate action intersects with women's rights because putting women in charge of their reproductive health means they have fewer children, which lowers carbon emissions. Climate advocacy also intersects with environmental justice, as the people hardest hit are poor and people of color, both in the United States and around the world. Climate advocacy works with animal rights because climate change leads directly to extinction of species and causes untold suffering to both people and animals. It is in the interest of every living thing on the planet for us to deal with climate change.

After the film, state representative [David Leland](#) spoke. We endorsed him last year as part of my work on the political committee for the Ohio Sierra Club. I was surprised to see him get pretty emotional about the film and the impact of climate change. Leland said he wished every public official would see this movie, which I do too. He spent most of his talk encouraging students to find out who their legislators are on the state and local levels, and be in touch with them on a regular basis. It sounds like the Koch-funded legislators in the Ohio statehouse are going to introduce yet another measure to attack Ohio's renewable energy standards. We are lucky that Gov. Kasich was sane and reasonable enough to veto such an attack this year. Hopefully he will do so again. The Ohio Sierra Club is tracking this legislation and will be working to defeat it.