



Science community looking for ways to get climate message across

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NEW HAVEN — A collaboration of Connecticut nature centers and science museums are considering the best way to educate visitors about global warming — before it's too late.

Representatives of about 30 learning centers, environmental organizations and research institutions met Wednesday morning at the Peabody Museum of Natural History to launch the daunting process.

The overall message is simple, but explaining the cause and effects of global climate change are not, participants said.

"Our country is faced with two divergent trends — the increasing scientific content of public issues, while the science literacy of the American public seems to be going down," said James Gustave Speth, dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Study.

"Those two issues could threaten our democratic discourse. The science centers' role is important," he said.

Among the lessons to be taught is the increasing evidence of global warming and the effects this change is likely to have on the environment and human health, speakers said.

Adam Markham, executive director of Clean Air Cool Planet in New Canaan, said, "We know it's getting warmer here. We can show what's happening," he said.

Connecticut's wetlands, average rainfall, vegetation and fisheries are all adapting to higher average temperatures, Markham said.

Speth said that scientists around the globe are seeing the negative consequences of global warming.

"Carbon dioxide is now higher than it's been in the last 400,000 years," Speth said. The burning of fossil fuels generates most of the heat-absorbing gas, he said.

"We're monkeying around with something we don't understand. It's a global experiment with no control," Speth said.

Speth said most action is being taken at the state and local levels as the federal government sits

on its hands.

Still, many people remain confused about the distinction between weather and climate, said Xuhui Lee, professor of forest meteorology and micrometeorology at the Yale forestry school.

Weather is a "snapshot," while climate is a long-term average, he said.

This is why weather prediction is difficult and climate is easier to model, Lee said.

Lee said computer models suggest that winter temperatures in New England will rise by 4 to 9 degrees by 2100 and precipitation will increase by 25 percent.

Forests and agriculture will change accordingly, Lee said.

Increased heat will lead to poorer air quality, the spread of vector-borne diseases, and a rise in infectious diseases, said Michelle L. Bell, assistant professor of environmental health at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

Higher rain will cause more overflow sewage into local waters, hiking the risk of cholera, cryptosporidium, diarrhea, and other diseases, she said.

Already poor air quality will deteriorate, worsening respiratory ills and heat stress, Bell said. By 2050, bad air will increase the U.S. death rate by 0.3 percent, she said.

The range of disease-carrying insects will spread north, possibly bringing an influx of malaria, dengue fever, and other serious problems, Bell said.

Over the coming months the Connecticut Science Center Collaborative will begin planning ways to transmit all of these ominous facts.

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