

STORM WARNINGS

Vol. II, Issue 1: March 2013
Climate Change: The Threat Multiplier



R. Michael Conley
Founder

The *Storm Warnings* newsletter is part of a larger initiative by its founder, R. Michael Conley, to carry the message to others.

"The message is frightfully simple: We are heading into a perfect storm that will forever change our lives, and we need to act on it while there is still time," said Conley.

Under the overall umbrella of his company, Weathering the Storm, LLC, its mission to *awaken, engage and help others weather the storm* is carried out in a number of ways.

The military and intelligence agencies get it: Climate change is a *threat multiplier* of destabilizing proportions. The threats are registering across larger swaths of the American public, but are they truly understood? In this issue, R. Michael Conley explains why the climate change alarm bells are ringing and the importance of effective messaging at this critical time.

WTS: Set the stage: What's the context and urgency for climate change messaging?

Conley: I speak to groups regularly on the perfect storm we are about to enter. I describe how four massive forces are on a collision course that will change our lives forever. For clarity, I dub them the "4-E" forces and they include: 1) Energy, 2) Environment, 3) Economics and 4) Expectations and behaviors. With limited presentation time, I've barely enough time to cover each one. The Environmental force – basically, climate change – is certainly a topic I wish I had more time to develop.

It occurred to me that many of my readers find themselves in similar situations when asked at parties or elsewhere to quickly summarize their views on climate change. It's hard not to respond with a monologue of data when they're looking for sound-bites. They get that glazed look in their eyes and walk away; another good opportunity lost.

My hope, in this interview, is to share a few thoughts on climate messaging that have worked for me. The time is ripe, after all, for carrying the message to others.

WTS: Let's start there: Why do you say the "time is ripe" to carry the message? What's different?

Conley: It's currently a headline issue that shouldn't be wasted. The ravages of climate change are erupting across large swaths of the economy in multiple ways. Homes and businesses have been wiped out; regional economies disrupted and personal lives upended by devastating natural disasters. Once an abstract concept, folks now see connections between climate change and the calamitous events befalling them. Their suspicions are reinforced regularly by

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"The *Storm Warnings* newsletter, which provides an in-depth bi-monthly look at a specific topic, is one way we hope to awaken and engage people, but we encourage folks to log in to our web-site for a full menu of offerings and services," Conley said.
(www.weatheringthestorm.net)

The website will provide further details on other initiatives. Among them:

1. Lethal Trajectories – Conley's futurist novel on what it will be like to live through a perfect storm crisis
2. *Weathering the Storm Guide* – A guide on how to prepare for the storm
3. Weathering the Storm Seminars – In-depth seminars that are now available
4. Blog, links, other resources, and the Storm Warnings newsletter.

About the Founder: Mike Conley is the Founder of Weathering the Storm LLC, and currently serves as Chairman and CEO of the Conley Family Foundation. As a former Fortune 500 business executive, author, lecturer, and public policy

an unending chain of storms and new scientific data.

Until recently, the insidious creep of climate change had camouflaged the danger it posed. Like the proverbial frog in a kettle of boiling water, the incremental warming was difficult to detect – much less feel. But now, like an erupting volcano, the manifestations of climate change are visible everywhere and registering big time on our personal radar screens.

WTS: What manifestations of climate change do you see awakening the public now?

Conley: The manifestations are everywhere and gaining force. Some we see; others we can scientifically measure. We may not see the rise of CO² levels to almost 400 parts per million; feel the effects of huge methane releases from the tundra, or sense the rising acidity levels of the oceans, but we know it's happening. On the other hand, the ice melts in the Arctic Sea, Greenland and Antarctica; massive droughts, floods, coral reef destruction and land desertification; and forest fires and crop failures of epic proportions are visual reminders of the ravages of climate change. More specifically, the frequency and severity of "once-in-a-lifetime" storms and the bizarre weather patterns that have wreaked widespread economic destruction are flashing in the public eye like a neon light.

As a threat multiplier, we can expect the effects of climate change to further intensify as temperatures rise, the air becomes moister, and unstable jet streams team up with other forces to produce mega-storms. The economic costs of Hurricane Sandy and crop production losses stemming from the massive Midwest droughts this past year are portents of things to come.

WTS: You've identified the signs, but have we really awakened to the threat of climate change?

Conley: There have been ebbs and flows in our climate change awareness levels, but the trend lines are changing. Clearly, the tide has turned since the down-days following the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in 2009. If you'll recall, the climate change "hoaxers" were in high gear at that time

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activist, Conley has written and spoken frequently on topics related to the perfect storm. He graduated from the University of Minnesota, after serving in the United States Navy, and later completed a post-graduate program at Stanford University. He is also active on several boards and advisory groups.

smearing the IPCC-4 report; rebranding the science of climate change as “junk” and/or “unsettled” science, and denouncing mitigation efforts as foolhardy job-killers. The hoaxers, however, were no match for Mother Nature.

More than anything, the killer storms, heat, droughts and bizarre weather patterns have awakened a lethargic public. Folks are seeing that there’s more to this than just an amazing set of coincidences. Anecdotally, I sense it in groups I address, and two recent polls corroborate this belief. The first, published by the University of British Columbia on February 5, 2013 suggested a close correlation between weather patterns and beliefs about climate change. The second, published by Duke University on February 13, 2013, reveals that American attitudes and concerns about climate change and their support for clean energy is on the upswing.

I harbor no Pollyanna illusions that we’re all united on climate change. Heaven knows, we can’t seem to muster the political will to effectively engage at a national level. Powerful lobbies and vested economic interests still hold sway, though the economic cost of Hurricane Sandy cannot be easily dismissed. I recall, with a sense of déjà vu, the similarities in how the tobacco lobbies admonished us not to move precipitously on the harms of tobacco until “all the data was in.” Those arguing against climate change are saying the same: “Hold tight because there’s not a consensus; the data’s not all in,” or “now is not the time to disrupt our economy with clean air regulations...” It’s like, fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.

WTS: When speaking to groups, what are your thoughts on climate change messaging?

Conley: The level of detail I provide is dictated somewhat by the time I have available and where my audience is on the climate change learning curve. Generally, they are not as plugged into the issues of climate change as, perhaps, those reading my newsletter, and I’ll limit my remarks in this interview to them.

Instead of bombing them with arcane climate data, I try to connect with them through metaphors and local examples. I also equate climate change to a chronic disease that directly affects the lives of many. I try to leave them with three thoughts: 1) That climate change is for real; 2) That there’s an intergenerational responsibility to address it and things we as individuals can do, and 3) That there are compelling reasons for an aggressive response. Let me elaborate on each point:

Connecting at a personal level: Climate change as a chronic disease: For many, climate change is an abstract concept and it needs to be personalized. I do this by equating climate change to the chronic disease of high blood pressure – the silent killer. Climate change pounds away at the vital systems of our planet – environment, eco-systems and

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self-regulatory mechanisms much like high blood pressure pounds away at our organs, cardiovascular and immune systems. It is under the radar screen and does its damage undetected. Hypertension is not a problem until it becomes a problem. But, as the symptoms progress, the effects become more noticeable – until it erupts in a stroke or heart attack. Similarly, in the case of our good Planet Earth, the manifestations I've just mentioned are now erupting.

Climate change is for real: The hoaxers would have folks believe there is little scientific consensus on climate change. Rather than argue the merits, I refer folks to a survey showing that 97% of the *climate scientists* believe it's for real. I then ask them who they would listen to if they visited the Mayo Clinic and 97% of the *specialists* confirmed their disease with only 2% saying more tests were needed and 1% saying there were no problems. Their responses are predictable, and I then ask them why some folks respond so differently when this logic is applied to climate change. Time permitting, I buttress this with climate-related data directly applying to their locale or personal circumstances.

Intergenerational responsibility and things we can do: There's a tendency of many to believe that climate change is too big for any one person to handle. When I share with them the fact that one gallon of gasoline produces twenty pounds of CO₂, and then advise them that this CO₂ will stay in the atmosphere for a century or more – impacting the lives of their children and grandchildren – the lights go on. Most people would never knowingly harm their families, and this one metric alone demonstrates at a personal level how we are all part of the problem and the solution.

Compelling reasons for an aggressive response: The motivations of groups I visit may vary significantly. Whereas an environmental group will respond to saving polar bears and eco-systems, business groups are more interested in saving money than saving polar bears. The key is to make a connection without compromising the message.

For example, business groups might see climate change mitigation efforts as costly compliance and/or regulatory impediments. However, the idea of reducing their operating costs through clean building retrofits or clean energy systems captures their attention. Again, the message doesn't change; only the manner in which it is framed. Finding and connecting with the value system of the audience is what effective messaging is all about.

Regardless of audience, it doesn't hurt to suggest the staggering costs of climate-related natural disasters and the cost of doing nothing. I also suggest the importance of a good community image and brand – for any organization – and focus on the new economic engines of growth that could come from migrating to cleaner energy and environmental systems.

WTS: Changing gears, can you say more about climate change as a *threat multiplier*?

Conley: Our military and intelligence agencies get it: They see climate change as a *threat multiplier*. It has become an integral part of their strategic planning and the future threats they foresee. For example, massive droughts – and the attendant famines they produce – are destabilizing events that pose threats of regional wars, mass population

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migrations and unhealthy competition for scarce resources. Fresh water shortages and/or the control of sea lanes or undersea mineral rights, ripe for exploitation as Arctic sea ice melts, are further examples of potential climate-induced flashpoints. A quick review of the Department of Defense's *2010 Quadrennial Defense Review Report* or the JOE-10, *Joint Operating Environment – 2010 Report*, will give an idea of how seriously these issues are taken.

There's another value in these reports – particularly when talking to groups that see climate change as a “do-gooder” issue with little substance. Their ears perk up when climate change is re-framed as a national security issue – one of great concern to our military and intelligence agencies. Again; same message, different message framing.

WTS: What happens when someone in your audience absolutely refuses to believe that climate change is nothing more than a hoax?

Conley: It's a given that this will happen, and I welcome the opportunity it presents to clarify some of the prevailing myths. I treat all questions in a respectful manner and usually suggest the person see me after the meeting if the ensuing dialogue takes up too much air time. My goal is to awaken audiences to the threat of climate change, not tell them everything they ever wanted to know about it. Hopefully, they'll respond. If not, at least the seeds were planted.

I also know that some folks may never change their minds and I accept that. No reason to get discouraged, and it helps for me to remember something Thomas Aquinas once said:

“To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary;
To one without faith, no explanation is possible.”

WTS: Why do you feel such a great sense of urgency to get the message of climate change out at this time?

Conley: Quite honestly, we're running out of time. We're reaching a greenhouse gas level of 400 ppm – far in excess of the 350 ppm many feel should not be exceeded to sustain life as we know it – and I can't help but think we're either approaching or at a tipping point of no return. I'm horrified by our lack of intergenerational stewardship and the mess we're leaving our kids and grandkids. There aren't many tomorrows left to deal with this, and denial is not a strategy. Ergo, we need to act while climate change is a headline issue prominently displayed on the public's radar screen.

Our gridlocked government is in no position to take the decisive steps required to reverse the trend. At best, we'll get a few cosmetic fixes here and there; kicking the can down the road is, after all, a safer political strategy. It has to start at a grass roots level and, in my own small way, that's what I'm trying to do in my efforts and mission to “Awaken, engage, and help others weather the storm.”

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The time is ripe to reach out to a concerned American public in search of answers. It's an opportunity we dare not squander, and our messaging on climate change is a critical part of that equation. My best wishes to everyone engaged in taking the message of climate change to others.

For more information, I invite my readers visit my website at: www.WeatheringtheStorm.net