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Getting right with the planet

Alan Betts (<http://alanbetts.com/writings>)

In a letter to the American Meteorological Society in 1976, I argued that if earth scientists, who had at least some understanding, did not accept some responsibility for the Earth, who would? Certainly not the political and economic system that had only short-term interests.

Forty years have passed, and now we see a very sophisticated network, funded by a group of libertarian billionaires, has bought control of the Republican Party in the US Congress and many state legislatures. Part of their doctrine is that climate science is a hoax. How has this happened and what motivated this fraudulent claim?

The 'libertarian' ideology is that government has a very limited role: primarily to protect wealth and property, and preserve the rule of law. It helps if you can also write the laws! The libertarian political agenda believes that the freedom to exploit the earth and its resources, should not be limited by environmental regulation. This brings it into conflict with the Earth's ecosystem on which life depends, because the impact of our industrial society is now global.

Environmental regulation of the massive waste streams from society and industry are viewed with hostility. Global regulation to limit the burning of fossil carbon to protect the future of the earth's diverse ecosystem is a clear threat to their fossil fuel assets. So it was a good business plan to use one percent of their wealth to take over Congress, and subsequent tax cuts largely paid for this investment. Indeed their opposition to climate science, and their claim that climate change is a hoax, can be viewed as simply propaganda that is driven by their fear of government regulation, and the need to protect their wealth, assets and property at all costs. As Pope Francis pointed out last year: the exploitation of the Earth and the poor are now inseparable, and both are immoral.

The trouble with this plan is that the Earth is far more powerful than our primitive self-centered ideologies. In fact, preventing or simply delaying a smooth transition to an efficient sustainable society, based of renewable sources of energy, greatly increases the risk that our societies will collapse in the face of climate extremes. And that rising seas will flood the coastal cities as the irreversible melting of the ice-caps accelerates.

Another deep issue we face is that their web of lies undermines democratic society. For the most part the scientific community stays above the fray with the naïve hope that more research and clear simplified explanations of climate science will eventually be heard. Instead, the increasing din drowns their reticence, and scientists who speak out are vehemently attacked as part of a fictitious global conspiracy.

So let us step back and look for a way forward. Even more so than 40 years ago, the Earth, earth scientists and all of us have a common interest. The Earth with a certain beauty and grandeur is simply absorbing and adapting to a changing atmosphere and oceans, and climate change is accelerating. The earth's

ecosystem in all its richness and complexity is adapting to change as fast as possible. But many life-forms will go extinct, and new ones will emerge.

We set this in motion, but almost none of it is under our control. All that we can do is slow down the pace of change by rapidly shifting from fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy, so that the Earth as well as our societies will have more time to adapt.

As scientists we study with honesty and integrity the evolution of a system that is far more complex than we can imagine. It is a global challenge, so we reach out to the global network of scientists that we trust: to share what we understand, and what we find puzzling. Every month new facets emerge that add insight into this amazing web of life that we are part of.

Every month my neighbors ask for my help and guidance. We long for simple answers as we face an uncertain future, but the truth, like reality itself, is complex. We must all look beyond our fears, dreams and ideologies to the Earth itself for guidance, because the Earth gets its stability by being fully connected.