

Year Of Climate Change <http://www.vpr.net/episode/50338/>

By **Alan Betts**

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(HOST) *After a year which set many new climate records, commentator Alan Betts says it is time to accept responsibility for the Earth.*

(BETTS) As a climate scientist, I like to look back in January on the year that has passed - at what we have experienced and ask what we have learnt. 2010 set many new climate records. It edged out 2005 as the warmest year on record - although the statisticians called it a tie. The Arctic is warming rapidly and last winter was remarkable because the polar vortex weakened.

As a result Eastern Canada, New England and Vermont had an extraordinarily warm early spring, while the southeastern United States and Europe had frigid weather.

The summer brought more extreme weather around the globe. Moscow reached 100 degrees for the first time, contributing to fierce forest and peat fires. Pakistan set a new temperature record of 129 degrees, and then the summer monsoon moved further inland resulting in catastrophic floods. Here in the north, Hudson's Bay froze nearly two months later than usual, and Vermont had a very wet fall. By the end of the year, the winter monsoon brought massive floods to Queensland in Australia. The Earth's climate system, which is rather unstable, is being driven by the increase in greenhouse gases and the warming of the Arctic into new patterns, and these are giving us new extremes of weather.

Climate change is forcing us to face something that nobody wants to face. It is now widely acknowledged that our industrialized world, created by science and technology and a market economy, is polluting the atmosphere and oceans; and driving rapid climate change. We now face the paradox that although humanity is responsible for this; the longer we delay in changing direction as a society, the more the Earth system is slipping beyond our control.

Climate scientists have been issuing warnings for twenty years, and every year our understanding of the Earth improves; so we can better estimate the climate risks we face. But there is a naïve assumption that our politicians will use this valuable information to redirect the economy away from fossil fuels, and so steer us away from the looming precipice of irreversible climate change. But in fact, politicians will say and do almost anything to avoid responsibility for difficult and painful decisions. So at the national level our paralysis has deepened.

That leaves those of us who realize that humanity must respect Earth system limits - or face the consequences - to cheerfully do what needs to be done to build a new resilient path for our communities.

Here in Vermont, this has been a year of visible progress - in retrofitting homes to reduce fuel use and starting the long transformation of our energy economy. The first megawatt-scale solar farm came on line in Vergennes last month, and small efficient biomass power plants are moving forward.

So, let us dream, plan and build together this coming year, and help secure the future for our children and for life on Earth.

<http://alanbetts.com/talks>