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Storying Climate Change

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Local testimonies build understandings of global climate change and galvanize meaningful action.

There is a lot of talk about how we can bring the climate change message to individuals, communities, and even policymakers in the United States in this era of climate change denial and even denial of the foundation of our knowledge base—science. I have thought a lot about this. I was one of the 1,000 individuals who trained with Al Gore's Climate Project in 2007 and proceeded to give over 50 community presentations based on that science. More recently, my anthropological research in climate change featured in a documentary and I now see that people are more moved by stories about those who are directly affected. This "storying" of climate change implicates anthropology's toolkit to the extent that our discipline trains us in cultural interpretation and translation.

Entering the stories of climate change

> ***Climate change was not only altering Viliui Sakhas' physical reality but also their cultural perceptions.***

My long-term work with Viliui Sakha communities in northeastern Siberia and their concerns in 2006 about changes to the timing of the seasons, winter and summer temperatures, precipitation patterns, and increasing water on the land, prompted our community-based project to understand their perceptions and responses. For me the ethnographic moment was how ten elders, in separate interviews, commented how the Bull of Winter was no longer arriving. The Bull of Winter is a mythological beast that Sakha understand as bringing the deep, cold, dry, snowless three months of winter. Global climate change has softened that extreme cold, so now instead of the annual snowfall stopping from mid-December to mid-March, it continues all winter long and the still is now replaced

with windy conditions. In other words, climate change was not only altering Viliui Sakhas' physical reality but also their cultural perceptions.

Willis Howard Ward Jr takes me and my host for a "tour" the morning after the documentary screening, equipped with maps, pictures, and notes to show how the shore is receding, the forests dying, and other changes. Susie Crate

Our project solicited ideas about what changes people were observing, how each change was affecting them and also what they thought the cause of each was. One critical finding was that most inhabitants attributed these changes to drivers other than global climate change. In my collaborations with a regional permafrost scientist, Alexander Fedorov, I understood how much of what my collaborators were experiencing was due to global climate change. This highlighted the need to bring in some locally-relevant scientific understandings of change. We did so in the process of facilitating knowledge exchanges. During these events, we foregrounded local inhabitants' observations, be they a gardener who observes new bird species decimating their tomatoes, a cowboy who sees the once-flat landscape falling and rising as the permafrost disappears, or a cow-breeder whose haylands are increasingly flooded and unusable due to changing precipitation and permafrost meltwater. Fedorov then shared scientific information and images that audiences could identify as similar processes to those they were experiencing.

Our eight knowledge exchanges were successful beyond our expectations. One unexpected result was the cathartic experience for communities—by coming together and sharing their observations and concerns, they were not only able to begin to build a local knowledge base of these changes, they created a support community in which they continue to discuss and bring new knowledge to the table. In other words, they began to be empowered to connect with each other and continue to

develop their understanding. Thanks to National Science Foundation (NSF) funding, our project was able to develop and print 3,000 copies of a handbook on local change, produced in collaboration with the community and distributed throughout the Viliui regions. We also piloted an Atlas interface, with consultation from Exchange for Local Observations and Knowledge of the Arctic (ELOKA), that began the process of monitoring local change in one of our research villages. This process along with shorter research experiences in Mongolia, Kiribati, Peru, Wales, and the Chesapeake Bay, has helped me to understand the powerful role that narrative and story play in bringing communities into conversations and understandings of global change. It turns out that no matter where people live, they are moved by stories that resonate with their sense of place and mode of being on the planet.

Coming home to stories

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This realization of the power of stories has also come home to me since the November 2015 release of *The Anthropologist*, in which I play a significant role. Audience members tell me that the documentary is powerful precisely because it brings them in to people's lives, and it is the storytelling aspect of the film that does this. I have been told that it is much better than serving up the science and then telling people what to do about it. Instead, as humans have done for most of our history, it tells the story of this global change via people's lives and livelihoods. We enter into their worlds. We are touched by their community and family connections and the threat to their culture that unprecedented change presents. We feel their tragedy. There is no prescribed call to action waiting for the audience in the final scene. The to-do-list is in the minds of each individual, as they reflect on the stories and decide how to go forward and act.

I have started to act as a kind of agitator in this process. After the film, as I conduct the Q & A session and have answered a dozen or so questions from the audience, I turn the tables and ask the audience what they are seeing in their own lives. I do not cease to be amazed at what I hear. Audience members testify about change, others respond and add to the spoken testimony, and this sparks more testimony by others. By the end of the session, the audience has created their own local observation group (if they choose to do this). And it is not just elders, younger people are equally impacted and aware of changing climate dynamics.

S#%@ gets real

Karen stands in awe to contemplate how much the shoreline has receded in just 25 years of change in the Chesapeake. Susie Crate

I was in Mathews, Va, a small settlement on the Chesapeake, screening the documentary and, during the Q & A I asked the audience what they had seen in terms of changes. An elderly man raised his hand and began to recount his observations, and while I listened to him I could see a dozen heads in the audience nodding in agreement with his testimony. He described in detail how the ocean has eroded the shoreline and the devastation it has brought to the area. After the show, he came up to me and said he would take me for a tour. So at 8:30 a.m. the next morning, he met me and my host, and armed with a pile of maps and scribbled notes he took us to see for ourselves. We drove from one site to the next to see how the shoreline was receding, how the houses had all been put up on eight foot risers to protect them from the waters, and how the lighthouse was no longer connected to the land—rising sea-levels washed away the land bridge. As we drove to our last site, my host, Karen Holmberg, a 44-year-old archaeologist who grew up in Mathews but resides in New York City, told us how she used to come to the beach we were headed to in the mid-80s as a teenager to drink beer with her friends. When we got there, her jaw dropped and she stared out to the water's horizon in amazement. Pointing towards that horizon, about 30 feet out from the beach, she commented, "See those white caps out there? That is where the beach used to go to." She turned off the car, got out and stood on the shoreline, looking out at the white caps. After staring for about ten minutes, she said, "S#%@ gets real." Over the course of 20 years sea-level-rise due to climate change has wrought significant changes on the shoreline—and this worked to change my host.

Such testimony provides a powerful means for understanding climate dynamics and motivating meaningful action. In the last decade especially, anthropologists have been documenting such stories, for example, my research and the Bull of Winter story, which motivated local communities to participate in research. As climate change becomes more apparent in temperate regions, "even"

people in the Chesapeake can have this sort of interaction, bolstering the role of anthropologist as researcher as well as galvanizer for greater understanding and action.

Susie Crate is professor at George Mason University and has worked with indigenous communities in Siberia since 1988. She is the author of numerous peer-reviewed articles, ***Cows, Kin, and Globalization: An Ethnography of Sustainability*** (2006), and is coeditor of ***Anthropology and Climate Change: From Encounters to Actions (2009)*** and ***Anthropology and Climate Change: From Actions to Transformations*** (2016). She also served on the AAA's Task Force on Climate Change.

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