

Tipping Point: Art & Climate Change

September 14, 15, 2008, Oxford, UK

Meeting report from Lynne M. Carter, Ph.D.

Background on TippingPoint: What they do¹

TippingPoint aims to ‘harness the power of the imagination to help stabilise the climate’. They offer a range of activities centered on exposing creative artists to the enormous challenges of climate change; at the heart of this lies a series of meetings involving very high quality, intense dialogue between artists, scientists and others close to the heart of the issue. These encounters provide a chance to explore the broader cultural challenges precipitated by climate change.

Appreciation of the cultural implications, and exploration of the role that artists can play in understanding, interpreting, communicating and investigating the subject is critical to this thinking. TippingPoint’s role is to be a catalyst in facilitating the debate, and to find new ways of increasing the level of engagement of artists in this complex issue. In addition TippingPoint can make a significant contribution to how artists can be critical players in the societal shifts in thinking and behavior that are essential to combating the effects, current and future, of climate change. The arts have consistently played a role in society in helping thinking shift from reflection to action.

TippingPoint is a network-based organization aiming to be a year round ‘connector’ of the arts and climate science worlds while offering critical and strategic points of engagement through one-off events, conferences, and public debates. In addition TippingPoint is poised to harness the responsibility and will of the wider cultural sector to explore and make informed commitments to mitigate ongoing carbon emission and adapt to the current effects of climate change.

The intellectual core of TippingPoint

The Oxford Meeting

Hosted by Oxford University’s Environmental Change Institute, and first held in 2005, the annual conference/workshops have established themselves as a unique forum for climate scientists, artists and others to meet, discuss and engage with the challenging subject of our time, climate change. Central to the discussion is an exploration of how the arts and cultural sector can work with the subject, and how the approaches of artists and others can help inspire the work of scientists.

The format of the event is extremely engaging and participative: the organizers recognize that everyone present has a major contribution to make, so they keep ‘being talked at’ to a minimum. There is no PowerPoint.

¹ Taken directly from the website: <http://www.tippingpoint.org.uk/oxford.htm>

The 2008 TippingPoint meeting: September 14, 15.

Opening Discussion:

Rather than any direct presentations, the meeting began with two very brief introductions to two important issues and then discussions involving the participants. The first speaker was Charlie Kronick, the International Green Peace activist recently acquitted of damage to a coal fired power plant in the UK using the defense that damage to the specific power plant property was required to avoid a far greater damage to the environment by building more coal fired power plants. His topic was: The International Political Process. A few of his specific points included:

- The IPCC started out as an esoteric meeting of a group of scientists and has become a “circus” where multilateral governments get together to discuss how to solve the climate change issue. This is NOT going to be the process that solves the problem.
- There are a number of unintended problems that have emerged:
 - the environment has no monetary value
 - we have turned the atmosphere into another commodity to buy and sell

The real issue is: How can we support a process that doesn't really get to change?

J. Timmons Roberts is a researcher and author from the College of William and Mary, has been a James Martin 21st Century Professor at the Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University, and will soon be at Brown University as the director of their Environmental program, spoke about the US Process. His major point was that we need to address inequality in who is suffering and who is acting. He described the US process and some of the roles and actions of the President, the Congress, and non-state actors. He briefly described various bills and the important players and that the actions of the non-state actors are beginning to add-up to some movement in the absence of a federal policy.

Some of the questions and comments in relation to both presentations were interesting:

- Is it too scary? There is a social psychology of denial.
- Denial may be due to the information from skeptics being more in people's faces than the truth in ways that people can use and understand.
- In fact, the fiduciary responsibility to keep producing money is primary for oil companies.
- Jim Hansen helped the Green Peace activists' non-guilty finding because he appeared and testified in a way that everyone could truly understand the seriousness of the issues.

Mobilizing to Action Vote

Following this initial presentation/discussion all participants were asked to vote (by where they stood) on this question:

Which of these do you think is the most significant to mobilizing action on climate change?

- Vision and inspiration
- Incentives and rewards
- Fear
- Legislation and compulsion

Different folks had different reasons for their votes and there were many in the middle of the room between the signs meaning that those in the middle felt all of those reasons were important to mobilizing action and none significantly more important than any of the others. I voted for legislation and compulsion: we have had all of the others for quite a while and nothing significant has happened but when there is a law, we must comply.

Small Group Challenge

All of the invited participants were divided into small groups and given a challenge that would be performed at the end of the conference. The challenge was to create a story, performance, poem, or some other creative way over the next day and a half to focus some of the information that was gathered during this meeting. The goal was to achieve this performance in 50 words or 2 minutes maximum delivery.

The project that my group developed was loosely based on the *Mad Hatter's Tea Party* from *Alice in Wonderland* where the entire table was set with dirty places except for the few where the Mad Hatter and his guests were seated. We called it "The Carbon Café."

Small Group Challenge: A skit – *The Carbon Café*

Max and Lynne walk into a café where Musa is the waitperson. Clay represents the Western world and is sprawled across all the seats and is very fat.

Lynne: "The Carbon Café? Haven't eaten here before."
Musa: "Everybody has, trust me."
Max: "Anywhere to sit?"
Musa: "There" [seats them on top of Clay]
Musa: "Your order?" [Lynne and Max carefully select]
Lynne: "Cod for me . . . Crude oil for him."
Musa: [points at Clay] "Sorry, he's eaten that."
Lynne: "Rainforest?"
Musa: (shakes head, no)
Max: "Coal?"
Musa: (shakes head, no)
Lynne: "What do you have?" (frustrated)
Musa: "Algae; Third World Debt; Denial"
Max &
Lynne (together after thinking a moment) "Denial, Please."

[Tom knocks on door]

Musa: "Sir"
Tom: [walks in with Musa] "What's on the menu?"
Musa: "Plenty, Sir, plenty. (aside) Eat while you can."

The TippingPoint Debate: Chaired by Professor Diana Liverman, Director of the Environmental Change Institute of Oxford University

The TippingPoint Debate was a portion of this invitation-only conference that was open to the public from 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm on Sunday, September 14th. The objective was to explore four emerging themes from the climate change arena that would expose various sides of the issues to help everyone present refine and develop their own opinions; as far as possible. There were two speakers per theme presenting their ideas as the starting point for conversation, exploration, questions, and points of view from the audience were invited.

The four discussion themes and their presenters were:

1. *How urgent is urgent – is it one second or one minute to midnight?*
Dr Dave Frame, James Martin 21st Century School and Smith School for Enterprise and Environment Research Fellow at Oxford University
Professor Mark Maslin, Director of the Environment Institute at University College, London. Both are experts on climate science and its links to policy.
2. *Reducing Emissions: Does the solution lie in new technology or behaviour change?*
Dr Malcolm McCulloch, leader of the Electric Power Group at the Department of Engineering Science, Oxford University
Dr Brenda Boardman, expert on energy use and formerly Director of the Low Carbon Futures group, Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University.
3. *Carbon Offsetting: solution or distraction?*
Peter Newell, Professor of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia and James Martin 21st Century School Fellow at the Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University
Mike Mason, founder of Climate Care, a leading provider of carbon offsetting solutions
4. *What is the role of artists in engaging with climate change?*
James Marriott, writer, artist, activist, naturalist, and founder and Co-Director of PLATFORM
Heather Ackroyd, artist, who as part of Ackroyd & Harvey creates time-based interventions that frequently reflect both scientific and architectural concerns

Topic 1: Is climate change really so serious that it is too late or not so bad?

Mark: No we are not “stuffed.” Global Warming is not Galactica. The world has been warmer, wetter, more productive, etc. Humanity will survive. It is really about human misery: 800 million people go to bed hungry; 15 million kids will starve. We must deal with global poverty in dealing with change. We can use climate change to ride the wave of change.

Dave: Are we stuffed? Not globally. Climate change will exacerbate some vulnerable/difficult locations. Many timescales, ecosystems, and actors will vary in suffering from climate change.

There are a multitude of interests involved. Really we will see climate change exacerbating present problems and the difficulties that people will experience. We need to take vulnerable communities more seriously instead of just redistributing wealth.

Parts of the discussion:

- Does a more sophisticated understanding of impacts galvanize actions?
 - a. Be careful of the actions you choose
 - b. Be sure that the galvanized actions are sensible
- We seem to have a touching faith that national and international organizations have the ability to take useful action. How do you take the action models of CA or the EU and apply those globally?
- What can a planner be told?
 - c. plan for different outcomes than in the past
 - d. include a range of extremes in your plans
- Is the Gulf Stream still functioning?
 - e. The Atlantic ocean is variable because of oscillations
 - f. Salinity is dropping
 - g. Path of the Gulf Stream can change and it could happen in a short time scale if it happens – a decade or less
- Sudden climate change in the past has taken place but we had small populations at the time. What would be the risk from a major change in the Asian monsoon? Some models show extreme monsoons or failing monsoons. This could possibly be one of the largest risks to humanity and to suffering.
- CC Adaptation Planning: look at recent extremes- flooding can be over the top – we may have a mismatch between likely impacts and little issues. Need to look at a closer match between serious concerns and their possible impacts.
- UK sees the risk of CC and has the info on the correct scale.
- Extreme events have become more common. UK is not much of the problem. Must become and remain part of the team to solve the problem.

Topic 2: Reducing Emissions: Does the solution lie in new technology or behaviour change?

Malcolm: Society is good at optimizing and mostly for increasing standard of living at the least possible cost. We have ignored the secondary costs. We have also exerted payment on our fellow man through extreme poverty. Secondary and hidden costs can no longer be neglected. Existing technology no longer works. A new revolution for new technology is required. Challenge for new technology is to provide goods and services with as little carbon output as possible.

Brenda: The way we *use* technology is wrong and *we* are the problem. Technology has a mandatory minimum and that is only due to regulations. The problem is that all technology is not benign. It is the way we use technology and technology needs a human hand to turn it on. We are really looking for a better quality of life not just a higher standard of living. Many are beginning to choose a simpler life – we all need to resist or unlearn consumerism.

Selected discussion comments:

- Is it really that technology is top-down and behavior is bottom-up? What about the fact that the bottom-up impacts the top?
- Do what you know even if you don't have all the answers.
- Human population growth is the real problem. Also consider the fact that the number of households has increased more than the percentage increase in the population (that means that more people are living alone or in smaller groups).

Topic 3: Carbon Offsetting: solution or distraction?

Peter: What do we think is the real problem? Carbon offsets is the wrong solution to the wrong problem. Emissions from a functioning economy is where the emissions need to be reduced. Carbon offsets reduce the political momentum to address the real problem. All we are doing is shifting the larger burden from where the reductions need to be made – in the north – to those areas that are more vulnerable – likely in the south. The result is that we have taken options out of the future repertoire of the area. By doing this we are allowed to continue growth in carbon intensive areas. Carbon offsets don't really reduce CO₂ outputs. Do they lead to behavior change? – no. There should be regulation so offset companies should only buy from certified groups – not from the uncontrolled, unregulated, unaccountable [ENRON environability] voluntary market.

Mike: If there is not a real reduction in CO₂ then it should not be counted as an offset. Doing offsets must never divert reductions. This is a serious problem. Behavior change is not enough to get CO₂ reductions. Religions have failed for thousands of years to effect behavior change. This is a drastic and urgent problem and the only way to get to net zero now is by carbon offsetting. Think about carbon offsets and economic structural change. If you had a hole in a boat while you were fixing the hole (technology and economic structural change) wouldn't you also want to be bailing (offsets) until the hole were fixed?

One comment: Carbon offset – a carbon storage trust. We buy forests to grow and soak-up carbon in the process. It is an offset today because we take the offset money and invest it in projects that otherwise would not have occurred. The critical question is one of *additionality*. Would the project have occurred without the new money from the offsets?

Topic 4: What is the role of artists in engaging with climate change?

Heather: What is the primary role of the artist in engaging in climate change: to inspire, to communicate, to bear witness, and to engage politically. Art as transformative.

James: Artists are citizens and have a role in constraining CO₂ emissions and in the politics of CO₂. An artist is visionary and that is not exclusive to artists. Scientists are the reactionaries telling us that it is more urgent to reduce CO₂ faster. The job of the artist is to make visions out of the numbers given us by the scientists. The artist is an oil and gas driller. We now believe that we must very quickly remove ourselves from this carbon-based economy. BP has set a goal

of 550 ppm and that will lead to approximately four degrees change. UK is responsible for 2.5% of the global CO₂. BP is responsible for 5.6% of global CO₂. At the same time BP sponsors all sorts of culture and arts in the UK. Need to shift away from their money to support the Arts.

Selected discussion comments:

- How would you replace that sponsorship money? You would need to be creative.
- The arts and the sciences need to use this issue as the ennobling issue of our generation.
- Do artists need to be politically engaged? Do you think all artists' work is politically engaged?

Show and Tell

All participants were requested to bring something with them that meant something to them and that they could relate to climate change. We were then assigned to various groups to discuss our items. One of the interesting things that I learned during this session was that 40% of the Earth's surface is covered with burnable vegetation starting a conversation about fire impacts on the Earth's surface and how that might change with projected climate changes.

What are you wrestling with in relation to climate change?

The participants were asked to divide themselves into groups around 4 signs: political, philosophical, professional, and personal that could identify what aspects of the issue of climate change you were struggling most with. As in the earlier session like this some folks were in the middle of the room because they felt there were issues in each of the areas that they were trying to decide about. My only response was that I wanted to politically influence people into action. I am already committed personally, professionally, and philosophically to action around the issue of climate changes and have been for many years.

Open Space effort on "What to do next" or Next Steps

When utilizing the Open Space concept there are a few important guidelines.

- All topics to be discussed are identified by the participants
- The sessions start when they start
- They end when they end
- Law of two feet applies: it is perfectly acceptable to get up and change your discussion section as many are on-going simultaneously in the same or a close space
- There are butterflies and bumblebees and it is ok to be either: a butterfly goes from group to group and may stay for a long or short period of time. A bumblebee may drop into your group with some interesting information that it picked-up from another group and that could well change the direction of the discussion.
- What happens in the discussion is the only thing that could happen.
- Whoever shows up is the right person/people.

There were so many discussion topics proposed that we were asked to combine topics. Of course I wanted to talk about Adaptation. As it turned out Richard Lamb, the training officer from UKCIP also wanted to talk about Adaptation. We ended-up having our own discussion. I wanted to speak to him to better understand his method of training the public around these issues. Only to find out that the charge to UKCIP is to develop climate change info for businesses and organizations, not for the public at large nor for communities. However, getting

people to understand about climate change and scenarios uses similar methods for increasing public understanding regardless of who that public represents.

I was delighted to learn that the UKCIP program and my strategy of talking to folks about what is the definition and relationships between mitigation and adaptation; describing the link between climate and weather; talking about scenarios and what the impacts of such changes might be; and encouraging identifying positive and negatives of those impacts (UKCIP uses the words: opportunities and threats) are very similar. UKCIP also has seven business areas/topics that they work with businesses around. We discussed one interesting aspect of the UKCIP program that Richard identified as experiences working in specific issues – for example they have had a problem with the black top on some roads melting. The communities have used woodchips for example to absorb the tar and the UKCIP program is suggesting that there could have been a more scientific approach to the response (but it worked and was cheap and might work for a while). They also are encouraging some research into what is the threshold for melting roads in the UK. They will look at summer and winter warming. This is an easy example to help locations begin to think about climate change adaptations. [I want to begin also with issues that are already problems for communities – it makes the discussion much less abstract.]

The UKCIP program has developed the Adaptation Wizard. It is a computer program that assists in helping people to think through and begin developing an Adaptation program. It is free, on the web, and has been tested and used. For example, the SW Tourism council has used CIP data to develop a tourism comfort index. By looking at the potential +/- due to changes in climate a region can plan to develop more or less accommodations, restaurants, and other tourism developments in areas with growing potential for tourism and perhaps focus on other development potential in areas not looking like they will support positive tourism comfort indexes.

This one-on-one discussion was one of the highlights of this program for me. This UKCIP program is so far ahead of anything in the US that it was remarkably encouraging to me that I also was planning many similar steps to what they had developed in working with the public with years of practice, support, and data. It also encouraged me to learn more about actually using the Adaptation Wizard and reinforced that there is no need to reinvent the wheel when looking at helping folks to consider adapting to climate changes, instead we should all make the best use of proven techniques and share our resources.

Coaching

We were divided into groups of 3 to spend some time in listening to one another and helping us each to look for clarity in our next steps related to climate change. The two folks I talked with were both artists. One of them is working with Transition initiatives where the focus is on what do people want their lives and towns to look like after peak oil. It is a way to move from oil dependency to local resilience in all aspects of life. The goal is to encourage folks to envision the next phase of our society with excitement and not think of change as a hair-shirt experience. She only began this effort one year ago and is already committed along with her family. She is going to continue to work on this effort of building real resilience both politically and through artistic presentations. Her goal is money-raising to support more such work.

The second participant in our coaching group was one of the participants in my creative group. He is a writer and a musician and now has so much more understanding about the urgency of the issue that he plans to write a song that he hopes will help others to see and learn about what he now knows and believes.

Closing Session

The closing session was devoted to presenting our creative efforts. They were remarkable in their differences and yet all were focused on what needs to be changed to achieve societal resilience. They were funny, sad, sobering, clever, stunning, and fabulous. I am a true scientist in my heart and never really thought about the important role in this issue for the artists in this world. There are many who can and will learn critical things from this group of those who are different from me and who express themselves differently. Many will see and feel our cultural values and help them to change but only as they can be transmitted through cultural resources. I feel honored to have been invited to this fascinating meeting