

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Our perilous future

Just before Christmas, NASA scientist and former astronaut Piers Sellers died of pancreatic cancer.

Sellers received his diagnosis a year ago and wrote about it in the *New York Times*:



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

"This diagnosis puts me in an interesting position. I've spent much of my professional life thinking about the science of climate change, which is best viewed through a multidecadal lens. At some level I was sure that, even at my present age of 60, I would live to see the most critical part of the problem, and its possible solutions, play out in my lifetime.

"Now that my personal horizon has been steeply foreshortened, I was forced to decide how to spend my remaining time. Was continuing to think about climate change worth the bother?"

"Very quickly, I found out that I had no desire to jostle with wealthy tourists on Mount Everest, or fight for some yardage on a beautiful and exclusive beach ...

Keep working

"Instead, I concluded that all I really wanted to do was spend more time with the people I know and love, and get back to my office as quickly as possible.

"I work for NASA, managing a large group of expert scientists doing research on the whole Earth system

"This involves studies of climate and weather using space-based observations and powerful computer models. These models describe how the planet works, and what can happen as we pump carbon dioxide into the atmosphere....

"Last year was the warmest year on record, by far. ... On the science side, there has been a steady accumulation of evidence over the last 15 years that climate change is real and that its trajectory could lead us to a very uncomfortable, if not dangerous, place.

"On the policy side, the just-concluded climate conference in Paris set a goal of holding the increase in the global average temperature to 2 degrees Celsius, or 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, above preindustrial levels.

"It's doubtful that we'll hold the line at 2 degrees Celsius, but we need to give it our best shot. With scenarios that exceed that target, we are talking about enormous changes in global precipitation and temperature patterns, huge impacts on water and food security, and significant sea level rise. As the predicted temperature rises, model uncertainty grows, increasing the likelihood of unforeseen, disastrous events.

"All this as the world's population is expected to crest at around 9.5 billion by 2050 from the current seven billion. Pope Francis and a think tank of retired military officers have drawn roughly the same conclusion from computer model predictions: The worst impacts will be felt by the world's poorest, who are already under immense stress and have meager resources to help them adapt to the changes.

"They will see themselves as innocent victims of the developed world's excesses. Looking back, the causes of the 1789 French Revolution are not a mystery to historians; looking forward, the pressure cooker for increased radicalism, of all flavors, and conflict could get hotter along with the global temperature."

National Geographic film

Sellers's legacy includes an appearance on the National Geographic documentary, "Before the Flood." In it, he says seeing the atmosphere from space as a "tiny onion's skin" helped him understand the planet's delicacy and the importance of protecting it.

I hope everyone has a chance to see the film on the National Geographic Channel or elsewhere.



PIERS SELLERS