

# Shouting “Water!” in an Empty Theater

During the politically-charged presidential preliminaries the various “freedoms” are often invoked by the strict Constitutionalists among us. For those with the biggest mouths (or so it seems), freedom of speech is fittingly prominent. Arguments drawing the line between free speech and limitations on speech that might jeopardize human health or safety bring to mind the example of shouting “Fire!” in a crowded theater.

Fossil fuels heat the theater in winter and generate electricity to run the projector, cool the theater in summer, light the lobby, and pop the popcorn. We transport ourselves to the theater on the back of fossil fuels being burned in an internal combustion engine. If I were to shout “Fire!” in a theater, couldn’t I be warning people about the real risks from a changing climate that we contribute to by our everyday actions and lifestyle, including movie going? We know that the burning of fossil fuels releases pollutants into the air, including carbon dioxide, which according to the consensus of the experts, is a greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change and that the manifestation of those changes threatens our health and welfare. Yet most people would not be concerned because the danger is neither readily apparent nor immediate. Plus, that threat from fire is inappropriate to the setting. Wrong venue. *Mañana*.

Coincident to writing this article, James Q. Wilson died. He was co-author of the “Broken Windows” article (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1982). The article was described in the *Boston Globe* obituary as “...a touchstone for the move toward community policing.” The theory was that one broken window would lead to others being broken, igniting a cascade of events that would undermine the sense of well-being and public order in the neighborhood. Ultimately, that



disorder would lead to an increase in crime. Wilson’s research made the case that people would react, and even contribute to this decline, changing conditions that ultimately altered societal outcomes.

The key seemed to be the “here and now” of the broken-window condition, not some vague and uncertain fear that a future tipping point might be reached that would result in a rash of criminal activity. Most of us don’t run home and barricade the door when we see a broken window! However, a certain sense of unease or seed of discomfort may be felt from a broken window, or from an unusually warm winter, both seen perhaps as signs of impending decay.

There’s a distinct difference as we try to raise the alarm about water – both quantity (flood and drought) and quality. Cities and neighborhoods in “good repair” may allay concerns and provide a sense of social and economic health. Intact windows, fresh paint, good lighting and visibility, square corners and even manicured lawns and paved surfaces insulate us from the ravages of unwanted storm water, weeds, pests and even other people, while instilling a sense of order, control and aesthetic appeal. But, research shows that structures and infrastructure can contribute to environmental impacts. Even in excellent repair, development can be the “broken windows” of the ecosystem.

How do we address this dichotomy

of social and economic health, and declining environmental condition, where they coexist on the same block? The degree of damage can be simply and visually measured as the difference between our communities and a natural landscape, such as a forest. An undisturbed forest provides the ultimate in clean water resources for our use, and mitigation of floodwaters and drought. Like the controlled fire that fossil fuel burning represents, the threat of development on our water resources is real and insidious but, at once, not visibly alarming or imminent.

We do have the tools that can soften the effects of development on water resources. Research at our local Stormwater Center at UNH has demonstrated both effectiveness and economic benefits of management practices that can mitigate this problem and improve our lifestyle and economy. But shouting “Water!” to alert people and policy-makers of the risk and potential solutions often leads to public and political challenges and resistance because of perceived threats to our lifestyle, or pocketbook. Probably more distressing, however, is whether enough people are listening and acting. The theater may be nearly empty as many fail to relate the collective impact of our actions to the subtle but steady decline of the quality of our water resources.

Paul Stacey  
Research Coordinator, GBNER

# Spreading the Word

"Climate Change" those two words should not be controversial. Here in New Hampshire people are taking climate change seriously and working hard to make citizens aware of the consequences that we and our state face from the effects of a warming climate. From the NH Fish and Game Department's *Wild Times* and its other publications, to local churches, schools and organizations, the message is being spread to the public. It is becoming increasingly difficult to plead ignorance about climate change.

But once someone has attended a workshop or lecture, read an article, watched a movie or program on climate change what happens? Most likely, after registering some distress, people file the information away in the part of the brain that stores information on topics "too big or complicated for me to do anything about" and go about their lives. But this topic is too big and its implications too serious to just file away.

As people who care deeply about the environment, each one of us needs to get involved in some way to spread the word and the facts about climate change. Even if it just means pointing out to a neighbor how robins are now in the seacoast area for the whole winter when 15 years ago they returned in March or talking about the proliferation of poison ivy and invasive plants in the area. Those of you who volunteer here at the Discovery Center can publicize the concerns of scientists over the fate of the horseshoe crabs and their dependent bird populations as water temperatures rise. Ask a UNH Marine Docent or UNH speaker to do a climate change presentation for your organization, club or church group.

You can also write letters to the editors of local papers to make readers aware of some of the latest effects of climate change not just to us but to

people in other parts of the world. For example, the Pacific island nations like Fiji are already suffering from rising ocean levels that are causing flooding in their streets, destroying agriculture and killing fish and animals. Perhaps you can put links to news stories about climate change on your Facebook page or blogs. You can write to your Senators and Representatives and share information that you have on climate change and ask them to support initiatives that help curb energy use and promote alternative energy sources.

Most of all, take the time to educate yourself so that you can counter the claims of the climate change deniers. Examine their arguments and learn where they have obtained their facts. It is frustrating to realize that you have to do this, when to those of us who spend a lot of time outdoors or work with the environment can see the effects of climate change so clearly. But the majority of the public are not so lucky to be able to have time to be outdoors nor do they always pay close attention to the natural world though it impacts their lives every day. It is up to each one of us to "spread the word."

Sheila Roberge  
Volunteer Coordinator, GBNERR

## Volunteer Spotlight

### A Very Cool Job

Volunteers at the GBNERR meet lots of interesting people and funny little kids. They also get to work with a creature that never bites or pinches and never complains. It is a creature that is referred to as a "living fossil" and it is invaluable to medicine and research. This is the horseshoe crab, the star of the discovery tank and the most popular visitor to the shores of Great Bay. Our volunteers astonish visitors with their knowledge of the horseshoe crabs and how easily they handle them. What other volunteer opportunity can you think of where you can be the friend of a descendant of one of the oldest species on earth and can share the excitement of holding one with a child or adult?

The Center welcomes new volunteers to help out in the Exhibit Room and will introduce them to the horseshoe crabs and other creatures in the Touch Tank. Email [Sheila.roberge@wildlife.nh.gov](mailto:Sheila.roberge@wildlife.nh.gov) or call the Center for more information at 778-0015.

Now hear this!



CONNECTING COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENT  
**Volunteers**