

Do the issues of climate change and global warming hold the environmental movement hostage and have they overridden other legitimate concerns? Has climate catastrophism gone too far? This is at the core of Jonathan Franzen's recent piece in the New Yorker, "Carbon Capture, environmentalism vs conservation" (April 6). This piece has certainly raised the temperature of the environmental community. Franzen comes at the question as a self-described 'avid birder' who blames the catastrophism of climate change for making everything else that we might be concerned about look impossibly secondary and trivial, especially his beloved birds. Due to this single minded focus, he says, the principle of environmental protection, which might be considered the traditional intellectual home of environmentalists, has been sacrificed by the major environmental organizations including his and our very own National Audubon Society.

Franzen's piece is not a tight piece of scientific writing or even of scientific journalism but he makes the point that the language of catastrophism is at times destructive but also counterproductive. It can be the former when other issues gets squeezed out by the urgency of climate. It can be the latter because it so predictably leads to issue fatigue. We often hear that climate change is not *an* issue, but rather *the* issue of our times. Fifty carbon dioxide parts per million ago, Bill McKibben, leader of 350.ORG, warned that should we go any higher dire consequences would ensue. But here we are at 402 ppm and the sky has not fallen. Big things probably will happen and probably are underway, but the time scale will probably be substantial and signs of change variable and inconsistent around the globe. Much as with Chicken Little, there are risks in trumpeting that cry even if there is indeed truth in it. In particular, as we have seen, the public is already showing signs of fatigue on climate change, and we have not even begun to face the most difficult parts of the issue. Not even close. When we really face the necessities we will be looking squarely at our way of life. Leaving fossil fuels in the ground will mean turning to more expensive fuels here and moving away from consumerism. It will also mean subsidizing energy costs in the emerging third world countries of Africa and Asia.

Franzen talks about feeling bullied by the rhetoric of climate change and resents how everything else is cast as secondary. The logical extension of casting this as an issue that dwarfs all others is the sacrifice of habitat for industrial scale solar and wind farms. There are certainly places where large scale energy generation is consistent with habitat protection and preservation but our ridges and the deserts of the southwest are not among them. For example because climate change was presented to them as a near emergency in 2008 the Maine legislature rushed through legislation to fast track wind development by setting aside large parts of the state as 'expedited territory' where there would not be the usual environmental reviews and standards. The current scourge of industrial wind projects that are slowly growing on our ridgelines is the legacy of this approach, an approach that our state's major environmental groups supported then and to some extent regret now. At the same time, smaller scale, decentralized solar and wind got short shrift. Who were and are the beneficiaries here? To what extent have these big wind projects earned their keep and their impacts?

Even if his arguments are not 'tight' and fall prey to their own hyperbole, Franzen raises important questions. As he says and all of us know environmental protection and reducing the effects of carbon are hardly either/or propositions and should rather be embraced as hand in glove. Protecting our plant and animal diversity is surely the best way to promote ecosystems that are resilient and capable of adapting to what is to come. This being so we should not participate in the double standard that says we will be guardians or stewards of our state's natural heritage unless the permit seeker happens to wave a lot of 'green'.

