

## Notre Dame conference takes multidisciplinary look at climate change

Brian Roewe | Apr. 9, 2013 Eco Catholic

Beginning Monday, the U.S.'s most prominent Catholic university has played host to a multidisciplinary conversation on a multifaceted, wide-impacting and highly complex problem ? climate change.

Titled ?Climate Change and the Common Good,? the three-day conference at the University of Notre Dame was the product of collaboration among more than 16 campus departments, centers and institutes. Together, they have gathered its scholars at McKenna Hall, along with numerous speakers from other institutes of higher education, policy advocacy and scientific research.

Among the speakers in attendance:

- V. ?Ram? Ramanathan, a distinguished professor of atmospheric and climate sciences at the University of California-San Diego, and a co-chair of a [Pontifical Academy of Sciences report](#) [1] on shrinking mountain glaciers;
- Jessica Hellmann, a professor of biological sciences at Notre Dame;
- Dan Misleh, executive director of the [Catholic Coalition on Climate Change](#) [2];
- Nancy Grimm, a senior sustainability scientist at Arizona State University?s Global Institute of Sustainability;
- Andrew Revkin, a *New York Times* journalist and author of its ?[Dot Earth](#) [3]? blog

Norte Dame students and faculty have made much of the audience, but a large contingent from outside the university has attended, including students from other colleges and regional stakeholders. Outside attentive listening, students have been able to participate through daily research poster sessions, a graduate student panel, and following and interacting with the conference on [Twitter](#) [4] and Facebook.

Hellmann, who participated on one panel Monday and moderated another, told *NCR* that the hope was this conference could ?help spark meaningful and productive dialog? on climate change. That Notre Dame is a research leader made it a natural fit to host such a forum.

?We are uniquely poised to combine the sciences and humanities to make traction on this issue -- to design innovative solutions, to communicate the importance of this issue, and to enable action,? she said in an email.

Each of the conference's three days has addressed a different aspect. The panels on which Hellmann sat Monday were part of the first day?s focus on the science of climate change.

Sessions ranged from a review of the recent [National Climate Assessment draft](#) [5], the climate effect on urban areas, and long-term, human impact on the planet, as well as a Q&A session toward the end of the day. Some scientists expressed frustration with perceptions that the general public didn?t fully grasp the climate change problem, while others offered differing perspectives on the necessity to reduce carbon dioxide levels opposed to other greenhouse gases.

Such dueling perspectives represented both scientists' deep understanding of earth science, but also an example of "talk that is actually informed by the scientific literature," Hellmann said, and "a more productive way to debate climate change" than what normally plays out in mainstream media.

On Tuesday, the conversation switched gears to the ethical and social justice motivations to recognize climate change as a real problem requiring action. Celia Deane-Drummond, a Notre Dame professor of theology, used her presentation to look at how Catholic social teaching encompasses environmental care.

"I think that one of the main issues is that it's not just an optional extra for what you might call eco-warriors or people who are committed to environmental responsibility," she told *NCR* in a phone interview following her presentation, "but it's the duty and the responsibility of every Christian." In other words, it's at the heart of the gospel.

In prepared remarks from her presentation made available to *NCR*, Deane-Drummond described ecological concern as "the most profound basis on which other injustices take their shape."

"It is the right exercise of human dominion over the earth within the framework of obedience to divine law that is the means of human perfection. In other words, right dominion is not simply an optional extra in terms of Christian discipleship, but the *very means through which humans become perfect* and express the image of God," she wrote.

Other discussions from Tuesday included Stephen Gardiner, a philosophy professor at the University of Washington, describing climate change as an intersection of four storms - global, intergenerational, ecological, and theoretical - coming together to form the perfect moral storm.

Organizers and presenters alike told *NCR* they looked forward to Wednesday, when the themes of the previous two days will combine into a discussion of action and what can be done. Speakers include Revkin, Andrew Rosenberg, director of the Union of Concerned Scientists, and David Titley, a retired U.S. navy rear admiral and former chief operating officer for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"I personally think that this is exactly where debate should be: not about whether climate change is real or not, but about what are going to do (or not do) when confronted with scientific reality," Hellmann said.

**[Editor's note:** Check back at [Eco Catholic](#) [6] later this week for continued coverage of the Notre Dame climate conference.]

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[1] <http://www.nytimes.com/cwire/2011/05/06/06climatewire-green-smoke-is-sighted-as-vatican-releases-g-91480.html>

[2] <http://catholicclimatecovenant.org/>

[3] <http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/>

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