

Union of Concerned Scientists Press Conference

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My name is Jeff Altschul and I am the president of the Society for American Archaeology. On behalf of the Society, I want to thank Senator Heinrich and the Union of Concerned Scientists for inviting us to participate in this press conference.

As many of the other speakers here today will discuss, climate change is eroding--and will continue to erode--our historic fabric, disturbing and destroying many archaeological, traditional, and historic sites that embody the values we cherish as a nation. I want to speak less about specific sites than about two related topics: the management of historic sites, and the importance of archaeology in facing climate change.

In the United States, we fight the destruction of historic and cultural properties one at a time: a road, a well pad, or a commercial development is proposed, we identify the historic properties at risk, and we figure out what to do. Unless we change course, we will fight the effects of climate change the same way. Because climate change will affect resources at different times and in different places, it will be politically attractive to take a "save our lighthouse" approach, since each action is limited in scope and needed resources. We will go to heroic lengths to save historic New Orleans or the New Jersey shore after hurricanes, will spend a fortune on a sea wall to protect a lighthouse,

or commit vast resources to restore traditional grasslands or forests in the wake of fires. Over time, this strategy will be prohibitively expensive and end up saving lots of sites of interest to small vocal groups, but that may be of dubious value to the American people. It's time to engage in a different conversation: What do we want to save? What sites embody core cultural values that will diminish us as a Nation if they are lost? And, what are we willing to let go?

Much of the climate change debate seems to rest on an assumption that if we could only stop it, all would be well in the world. Is that true? Is there anything in our past that might help us? I think so. Humans have been adapting to climate change as long as there have been humans. Archaeology, the only science that studies the full range of human history, is full of examples of what to do and what not to do. For example, I often hear that there will be "winners and losers" as the climate becomes warmer and drier. Really? The last time the world heated up 1 to 5 degrees was during the Altithermal, between 9,000 and 5,000 years ago. In the area I study, the western US, you have to search far and wide to find any winners.

But are bands of hunters and gatherers really good models for our modern society? Probably not. My guess is that it was easier for hunters and gatherers of the Altithermal to adapt to a hot and dry climate. They simply moved to areas that could sustain them. We aren't so lucky. With 7 billion people on the planet, there are few places to go that are not already claimed.

Civilization and state-level societies are relatively recent phenomena, not much more than 5,000-6,000 years old. These are the most complicated and complex social forms of the most complex species on the planet. It is little wonder that they hold such fascination for us. Even though we don't understand them very well, certain patterns appear to hold when faced with potential catastrophic environmental change. First, there is a focus on improving technology, such as irrigation or modifying domesticated plants and animals. It is though each civilization believes they can think their way out of the problem. Second, there is very little change in the fundamental relationship between members of society. Those in power are loath to change a system that has worked so well for them.

Are we so different? We are willing to spend countless sums on improving technology, but next to nothing on how we relate to each other. Much like 4-wheel drive, our current technology-based strategy will allow us to continue down the road only to get stuck farther from a place from where we could extricate ourselves.

Can we adapt to a hotter and drier climatic regime? I think so. But if we are to do so, it will not be through technology only. We are social animals, and if history and social sciences teach us anything, it is that there are many ways humans can relate to each other. Our task is to find those that will work. Archaeology can help in this regard, but only if archaeological sites are available to study.