

Climate Change – Understanding the Science

The Earth is very old: more than 4,000 million years old, and the planet has endured many changes in its long life - some gradual, some severe, and a few very fast. The surface conditions on Earth - things like heat and cold, wet and dry, winds, clouds and so on - these things are what determines whether and where life on Earth flourishes, or not. And these too have changed again and again through the planet's lifetime.

Life has taken a battering many times, and always bounced back. It's resilient stuff.

But now something is going on that threatens, not so much life itself, but the artefactual life created by one species (ourselves), the thing we call human civilization. Humans created the threat too, accidentally, while they were doing what they do best - elaborating and expanding their civilization. We usually call this accident 'climate change', and it does indeed entail an induced change in the conditions of Earth's surface; but after some experience, we can now say that it is also a profound challenge to pretty much all our ideas of what human beings are, and what they are capable of. Most experts who understand the problem well, think this is by far the biggest and trickiest problem we humans have ever had to deal with.

What worries experts is the civilization. While deep history shows us that Earthly life and its many communities have withstood severe damage in the past, it also shows that civilizations have often collapsed under threats just like this one.

And ours is not like any that have gone before.

It is much bigger, way more complicated, interconnected and vulnerable in many of its parts, and innocent of any experience in the sort of danger that is developing. We can see this in the confused and contradictory responses of our various institutions; it looks as if we can both know, and not know the seriousness and urgency of this problem, all at the same time.

The course will begin with a close look at the precise nature of the climate problem, to establish just what it is we are dealing with; and doing this, we'll learn about the history of change on our planet - how and why this change is different. We'll look carefully into the causes of present change, and so learn something about appropriate remedies. We'll examine what our societies must do to manage the problem; what they actually have done, and what we ourselves can do to help with the larger response.

This is a subject with many sides to it, so the classes will be run in the form of a conversation, with questions and discussion a core theme of our learning. Nobody who has got to grips with this is indifferent to it - we all feel that being a spectator is unsatisfactory. So there will be opportunities for exploring how we can be part of a solution.

It is a serious thing to study. That is not to say it's all bad news, but the facts of climate change are inescapable, and anyone who wants to understand the times we live in will want to understand this.

To enrol in this course, click on the Courses button on the U3A Ipswich homepage, or contact the office for assistance.