Climate Change Q&A With Joellen Russell

University Relations - Communications
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The UA College of Science Lecture Series is entering its 10th year of educating the public on a popular scientific topic.

This year's series, "Earth Transformed," will focus on global climate change. The first of the six lectures will be given by Joellen Russell, UA associate professor of geosciences and planetary sciences, at 7 p.m. Monday at Centennial Hall. Her talk is titled "The Ocean's Role in Climate: Heat and Carbon Uptake in the Anthropocene."

A complete schedule of lectures in the series, which runs through March 7, is available here.

Russell spoke with Lo Que Pasa about why this topic is important and what the community can expect from her lecture.

What will you address in your lecture?

I'm going to be talking about the ocean's role in climate change. When most people talk about climate change, people just think about the air temperature and on the surface of the Earth, but in fact global warming refers to the warming of both the ocean and the atmosphere, and for good reason, because 93 percent of the human-made warming associated with greenhouse gases like fossil fuel went into the ocean. Only about 3 percent went into the atmosphere.

Why is it important for everyone to pay attention to this, and not just oceanographers?

How hot it gets in Tucson and Phoenix is a pretty good reason. I'm a scientist. I'm not a policy person. I'm not going to tell everyone what they have to do. What I'm going to do is provide you the information so you can make wise decisions about our use, about what we're going to contribute to the atmosphere as a nation, as a city, as a state. I'd like to use my best science to get that information to the people who are not just decision makers but regular folks because we'd all like to cut our bills and stuff, but maybe a little extra motivation is that we're making a better world for our grandchildren and our kids.

How have you been preparing for your lecture?
A big public lecture is different because you want to get them all the great science but you want to make it as accessible as possible, so I've had help from this amazing team who the dean has made available to us to help us improve our graphics and make it really beautiful. So I've been working on that. I've also been meditating on what it is I want to say to these people in Tucson. I've been given this great opportunity to say something about how climate change is happening and what the great science going on right here at the UA is on that subject.

How do you think people can pay attention to this issue more?

Tom Miller, vice provost for academic affairs, suggested that we provide teaching resources and resources to both the public and other scholars on campus who are maybe not (working) right in that vein but who are really interested in the topic. So I put together a list of my go-to websites. Those are available on the College of Science Lecture Series website [2].

How do you see people taking action on global climate change?

The students on campus have been a real inspiration. I have this intro to oceanography class that I teach, and the first time that I taught it I only had 150 students and I thought that was an enormous class. Last fall, we had 600 in class and 200 online, and this was my best class ever. They were fantastic. It was really inspiring. They made proposals on how they would make the world a better place and then they went out and did things and wrote up the results about if it worked or didn't work. I know that Tucson is full of people who have creative ideas and the oomph to put them into action and to make the world a better place.

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