

A different way to think about climate change

by Dylan Beach



Glacial waters from the Harding Icefield support many of the salmon streams on the Kenai Peninsula. When should we start thinking about a world in which it has melted away?

Do we look for convenient justification to do what is easy, to avoid tackling complex problems? Albert Einstein claimed that if the world depended on him solving a problem in one hour, he'd spend the first 55 minutes devising the right question to ask. I was left with the above question after spending my summer as a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Directorate Fellow at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

I chose to approach this problem by interviewing 13 people who represented the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Cook Inlet Region Inc., Kenai Peninsula Borough, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Forest Service. Together, these participants make resource management decisions, or permit public use, on roughly 80% of the Kenai Peninsula. That's why I spoke with them.

Our conversations were about—no, no, don't say it...climate change. Have you already moved on to

another article? If not, great. Specifically, we talked about roadblocks to adapting to climate change on a peninsula-wide scale.

By "adapting" or "adaptation" I mean management actions that help reduce the impacts of a warming climate. So we might plant lodgepole pines to reduce increasing fire risk near the urban interface, or buy riparian land parcels that seep cold water into nonglacial streams that are increasingly reaching lethal temperatures for salmon, or increase the diameter of road culverts to accommodate increasing storm rainfall events. These are, in fact, actions that are already taking place on the Kenai Peninsula!

Adaptation is different than mitigation, which are actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Adaptation is different than engagement, which is working with others to seek solutions to climate change and/or communicating climate change effects to the public.

But what did we really talk about because that, by itself, sounds terribly dry. At the end of the day, the interviews consistently broached the idea of having control over actions and outcomes. A USFWS employee said, “things like the agency’s own carbon footprint we perhaps have more immediate control of than some of our adaptation challenges.” Do we look to reducing greenhouse gas emissions because it is more important in the near term or because it is more manageable?

Interviewees made comments such as climate change “is important, but how do I get today’s job done?” Again, do we pursue mitigation because, with mounting priorities, it is easier to fit changing an incandescent bulb to an LED into our day than, for example, to design and implement a multi-jurisdictional plan to reforest part of the Kenai Peninsula?

“Park Service’s perspective is that climate change is happening and what can we do to assist in at least slowing it down from a one-person-at-a-time perspective. [Kenai Fjords National Park] is a park where you can see that it is happening first hand.” With 296,000 visitors during an average year between 2010 and 2014, they see opportunities to change behaviors, building mitigation (and ultimately adaptation) from the ground up.

What little adaptation that has been done has focused on infrastructure such as trails, cabins, and the few roads that exist—again, focused on manageable items. If we are wrapped up in thinking along the lines of “how much effort goes into how much progress?” then how do we tackle super complex issues like landscape-scale climate change adaptation?

However, what I’ve said above dramatically oversimplifies the issue. There are other, real challenges that cannot be ignored. For example, it’s difficult to have a unified approach to climate adaptation when different agencies have different missions. Much of the eastern side of the Kenai Peninsula is coastal rainforest and is forecasted to remain so for at least the remainder of this century, clearly reducing the urgency to adapt from the perspective of Chugach National Forest. Remoteness of parts of all three federal conservation units also poses challenges for implementing landscape-scale adaptation.

Funding is obviously tied to recognized priorities. An Alaska DNR manager said, “[climate change] hasn’t become a priority for the State.” Likewise, a

Borough representative said, “[Climate change] needs to be driven by a recognition from citizens and the public—that will lead to policy makers who can affect that type of change and make it a priority.” In a similar theme, CIRI prioritizes projects that will show shareholder returns. This does not always align with climate change adaptation (although it can).

Despite the barriers mentioned (and there are others), a rapidly warming climate is a recognized issue. A majority of interviewees said climate change is real, its effects are being accelerated by humans, and humans therefore have a moral responsibility to address those effects.

What we can say with certainty is that climate change on a landscape-scale is a big, hairy issue to tackle. We need to give it a haircut and reduce the feeling that it is too complex to address. First, the issue needs to be personalized so that people understand how climate changes might affect their lifestyle.

Second, rather than discuss climate change explicitly, the issues should be reframed. Participants mentioned salmon, coastal erosion, and fire as examples of unifying issues tied to climate change. Redirecting the conversation towards economics and risk would give climate change impacts broader receptiveness. Gaining broader public support could make climate change a priority for the Borough and the State, potentially rendering them more willing partners in collaborative adaptation.

Once more folks are on board, what then do we do? We still have a lot to learn. A USFWS participant said, “There is a need to start putting some of this stuff in black and white, documenting where we’re at, what we’re thinking, why we’re thinking it, and what possible solutions exist. We need to do this in a cohesive and comprehensive way.” Then, said a Park Service participant, “the key is building on successes. You keep pushing off from the last successful work that you did.”

Targeted collaboration and friendliness between neighbors will lead to a future of healthy, functioning populations of fish, wildlife, plants, and humans. After all, we are all in this together.

Dylan Beach is a USFWS Directorate Fellow at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. You can find more information at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.