

Climate Destruction - Bearing Witness with Dahr Jamail

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"The question is not are we going to fail. The question is how?" Stephen Jenkinson, author and storyteller.

Water, glaciers, oceans, food, forests and fires - all of these things are part of global warming under the magnifying glass of Dahr Jamail in his book *The End of Ice*.

Jamail is a first class hunter-gatherer of information. It is not just finding and reading scientific papers. It is climbing the mountains; it is meeting with and listening to the indigenous people living on the edge of disaster; it is walking in the forests, swimming in the coral reefs, and doing this in the company of those experts and scientists who have watched, recorded and wept over the changes for many years, choosing their place and staying there, knowing it will all be destroyed.

Each place he visited, each conversation he had with the experts on that place produced startling facts that should be, but aren't, trumpeted by the media, taught in schools, thrust down the throats of the climate change sceptics. And here is the message that the many scientists he spoke to stress: everything is happening much faster than predicted, and certainly much, much faster than you would know if you depend on your television, daily paper or politicians for information.

The book explores some of the hits the earth is already suffering through climate disruption and what that is leading to. And it is not just a few changes here and there.

It starts in the Alaskan mountains but then, for Jamail, it will always start, and end there. From an early age he has been mesmerised by mountains. Whether climbing them or just sitting and watching them, mountains have been central to his life. It goes without saying that glaciers are a part of that love.

And the glaciers are melting. No news there. What must be faced is how rapidly they are disappearing, all over the world. As glaciers die, so do the forests lower down the mountains. Without glaciers the mountain slopes dry out. With a warming climate and dry forests, massive wildfires are set to increase.

It is expected that in just a few decades the United States will have no glaciers left; Alaska is suffering more than most, only much of that is unseen, out in the wilderness. But what is happening there is happening globally.

Startling fact 1: globally glaciers hold 69 percent of all the freshwater on the planet. Many major rivers are fed by glaciers. Millions of people depend on them. What, one wonders,

will happen when the Ganges runs dry?

While the brutal seal hunt on Canada's east coast carries on, on the western side of the continent small communities struggle to find seals at all. They have moved further north in search of cooler waters. There have been massive die-offs of sea birds as the warming sea has killed their food. Small coastal and island communities with subsistence cultures are breaking up.

Startling fact 2: in the summer of 2016 the water in the Gulf of Alaska *"was 15°C warmer than normal in some areas. And it is now, over all, 5°C above normal in both the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea, and has been all winter long."* So said scientist Bruce Wright.

Coral reefs are extraordinarily beautiful, but they are not just there for divers and their cameras. Just as coastal communities in the north are seeing their food supply dwindle, so island communities that depend on the fish living among the coral reefs for their food are watching the corals die and the fish disappear.

It is common knowledge that warming seas are bleaching the coral reefs. What is not appreciated is that though corals can recover from a warming event, those events are now happening too often, too quickly for any recovery. A marine scientist, Dr Dean Miller, considering the prediction that coral reefs will disappear by 2050, told Jamail,

"I think it's too conservative, I really do... what we are seeing now is death."

Seas are not just getting warmer, there is acidification. This is threatening plankton, the base of the sea's food chain. Some plankton species are dying out while others flourish, leading to imbalance and 'a big problem'.

Startling Fact 3: phytoplankton photosynthesis produces half, yes half, the total oxygen supply for the planet.

Jamail went to the Everglades, a unique site of global importance and not without problems. Through human activity it has been robbed of its water and suffers from invasive species, but the real threat to come is rising sea levels. The rest of Florida may not be far behind. There is not a lot of high ground and most of the coast is vulnerable to ever-fiercer hurricanes and storm surges. With a projected 6 feet of sea level rise by the end of the century, much of Florida would be under water and its fresh water aquifer would be contaminated.

But Florida is also an example of why the world is not preparing for such climate disruption. Rick Scott, Florida's governor until 2019, is a climate disruption denier. He prohibited any state employee from even using the words 'climate change'.

Jamail went to the University of Miami to meet Dr Harold Wanless who was more than blunt:

"We've screwed ourselves. We have kicked the bucket. We have gone off the cliff."

As Wanless outlined the certain threats we are facing, Jamail wrote,

“Hearing the truth in a society steeped in various degrees of denial, I greet the bad news with relief.”

Wanless talks about the amount of heat human activity has put into the oceans, something we can't undo. He gives Jamail one last piece of data: in the past, atmospheric CO₂ varied from roughly 180 to 280 parts per million (ppm). This 100 ppm fluctuation was linked with about a 100-foot change in the sea level.

Startling Fact 4: Reacting to this information, Jamail recalled that since the Industrial Revolution, atmospheric CO₂ has increased by 130 ppm.

“That is 130 feet of sea level rise that is already baked into Earth's climate system!” he exclaimed. Wanless nodded grimly.

And it is grim. How do we prepare for seas taking over so much land? How do we face it? Can we even imagine what that will mean?

In 2015 Jamail experienced a seriously emotional and personal event (you'll have to read the book to find out what that was), and it was this event that helped him make sense of all that he was learning and how to use that knowledge. It is, after all, difficult to accept that all you know and love is due for demolition.

And this is his conclusion:

“I find my deepest conviction and connection to the Earth by communing with the mountains. I moved to Colorado and lived among them when I was in my early 20s, and it was there I began to deepen my relationship with them, and to really listen to them. I would hike out and just sit among the peaks, watching them for hours, and write about them in my journal. Today I know in my bones that my job is to learn to listen to them ever more deeply, and to share what they are telling us with those who are also listening.

“While western colonialist culture believes in “rights”, many indigenous cultures teach of “obligations” that we are born into: obligations to those who came before, to those who will come after, and to the Earth itself. When I orient myself around the question of what my obligations are, a deeper question immediately arises: from this moment on, knowing what is happening to the planet, to what do I devote my life?”

So he ends where he began – among the mountains.

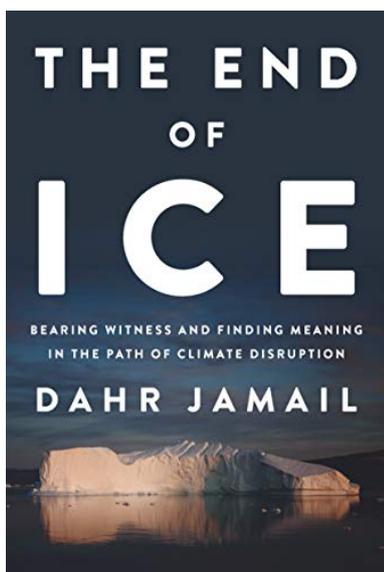
It could be a seriously depressing read, if it wasn't for Jamail's determination to understand and share with us what the earth is undergoing, and his loving commitment to be with it every step of the way. His skill in writing keeps you focused on what he has to say, and his ability to override the dire news he is recording with a compassion that sees beauty among the ruins is somehow both comforting and inspiring. Instead of despair it gives each one of us, as individuals, direction.

We might delay disastrous climate change by ending all carbon emissions but we cannot stop it, and it will be upon us much sooner than we like to think. But we can each choose

our place on the earth, sit with it, listen to what it is trying to teach us and share the knowledge we gain. We can support it, love it and be with it for as long as we live. The earth needs all the devotion we can give it.

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