



News Release

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RAPID LANDSCAPE CHANGE CONFERENCE WHITEHORSE, JUNE 15TH – 17TH, YUKON COLLEGE

HOW DID THE EARLY PEOPLES OF THE NORTH REACT TO RAPID CHANGES IN THEIR LANDSCAPES?

Next week an international conference: “Rapid Landscape Change and Human Response in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic” will be held in Whitehorse. The Whitehorse conference is part of a two-year series of international meetings under the heading “Dark Nature - Rapid Natural Change and Human Responses.” It is funded by the International Council for Science (ICSU), in cooperation with other international and national organizations, led by the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS). Approximately seventy-five participants from diverse parts of the world will attend this conference and take an interpretive field trip to the Kluane area. There will be a delegation from Russia attending as well as participants from as far away as Argentina and Scotland.

Media representatives are encouraged to attend the conference. The conference agenda has been attached to this email for your reference. We would be happy to arrange interviews with conference participants. A few suggestions for participants to interview:
For international perspectives:

- Suzanne Leroy (leader of the Dark Nature project)
- Nick Brooks (Tyndall Center for climate policy research)

For a take on environmental philosophy:

- Holmes Rolston

For palaeoscience:

- Marianne Douglas (frequently on Quirks and quarks)

Further information on the conference is available at:
www.taiga.net/rapidchange/index.html

Background Information

“The Earth is faster now.” This is how an aboriginal elder of Northern Alaska describes changes she sees in the land and sea around her. Across the Arctic the effects of warming are clear as we move inexorably into a period of change so rapid that it can be seen clearly within a single human lifetime. In the Yukon, ice patches are melting, to the delight of archaeologists who study the artifacts that are melting out after centuries of being frozen.

Scientists forecast that climate warming will continue into the foreseeable future, affecting animals, trees, plants, ice, permafrost and many other components of the direct environment. This is likely to be the most remarkable and challenging period of environmental change that has taken place in the past millennium. At least part of the driving force is the emission of greenhouse gases from our cities, factories, cars, trucks and planes, all products of ever-evolving human activity.

However, studies of glacier ice, permafrost ground temperatures, lake deposits, and coastal sediments also show that the climate has occasionally gone through abrupt changes throughout the past. Some of these events pre-date human occupation. Not all rapid changes are caused by variations in climate. Massive volcanic eruptions, huge floods, destructive earthquakes, and on a smaller scale landslides and coastal storms can also lead to marked changes in landscape conditions. As the record of past climates and of the collapse of past societies in other regions is increasingly revealed, it is clear that abrupt changes have been a part, of the natural background. People and ecosystems have endured these changes.

A better understanding of the ways in which early peoples responded to the rapid changes might provide insights that could help humans cope with current changes and adapt to those that loom on the horizon. This is the principle reason why groups of earth scientists, ecologists, climatologists, archaeologists and anthropologists will gather in Whitehorse in mid-June at a conference entitled “Rapid Landscape Change and Human Response in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic”. They will review recent advances in understanding the way landscapes have changed in the past 10,000 years and how aboriginal peoples might have reacted. Also on hand will be several environmental philosophers to draw out some of the broader implications for the way we think and act about sharp changes in environments.

The Whitehorse conference is part of a two-year series of international meetings under the heading “Dark Nature - Rapid Natural Change and Human Responses.” Earlier sessions have been held in Mauritania, where desertification had profound effects on early peoples and ecosystems, Mozambique, where “mega-floods” created havoc a few years ago, and Argentina, where rapid changes in the levels of a major saline lake flooded coastal towns where people came to bathe in the formerly salty water. Conference organizers are hoping to end the meeting with a consensus message that can be incorporated in the findings of the project, which comes to an end in September at a final gathering in Italy.

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If you have questions or would like to arrange interviews contact:

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