

Published: Friday, April 22nd, 2011

Panel speaks on climate change

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A panel of two professors and an outside artist spoke on the disappearance of glaciers in a public discussion held in Robertson Hall Bowl 016 on Thursday afternoon.

Wilson School professor Michael Oppenheimer, geosciences professor Adam Maloof and Philadelphia artist Diane Burko spoke on “The Politics of Snow” in a conversation moderated by Wilson School professor Stanley Katz.

While Burko spoke about her efforts to communicate the dangers of global warming through her art, Maloof focused on scientific evidence of global warming and Oppenheimer covered policy efforts to contain global warming.

Burko began by describing how she became involved with art to convey an environmental message. After a friend noted that the “politics of snow was too beautiful, too political,” she said she realized that she needed to think more about the meaning of her art.

Burko said she started her career by taking her own photographs and paintings, which she realized were becoming political. She added that she then requested photos from scientists and started to paint those.

“All the scientists were very generous,” Burko said. She added that she used the photographs to make paintings that depicted the changes in glaciers.

“My hope is that it moves all of us to do something,” Burko said when later asked about the power of art in environmental awareness.

Maloof then spoke, describing his talk as a description of “the history of ice on earth, how it works and what we know is happening today.”





With the help of charts, Maloof showed how the patterns of ice coverage have changed over the past 800 million years, 400 thousand years and finally the past hundreds of years.

Maloof differentiated between the glaciers in Antarctica, which formed about 30 million years ago and would result in a sea level rise of 60 meters if melted, and those of Greenland, which formed 3 million years ago and would result in rises of 6 to 7 meters.

Of most interest, however, are the mountain glaciers, he said, whose melting would only result in a 1-meter sea level rise but which are most sensitive to climate change.

Drilling in glaciers reveals important information about carbon levels, and drilling at the poles has resulted in a wealth of information on carbon patterns at the poles, he explained.

Maloof explained that, “We know very little about what happens in the tropics so high altitude low latitude [glaciers] are important because they tell us about the tropics.”

The discussion then transitioned to Oppenheimer, who discussed future environmental prospects in light of the effects of global warming.

“Looking back 50 years later, we will probably take a pessimistic view that we didn’t come to grips with the problems when we had the opportunity to,” Oppenheimer said.

Nonetheless, he added that, with uncertainty, there was a range of possible futures, and there was reason to be optimistic about the steps countries are taking to manage the carbon problem.

“I was interested in Oppenheimer because I have never heard such a hopeful interpretation, and I’ve been much grimmer myself,” said Lenore Malen, an artist from New York City who attended the event.

The discussion was held in conjunction with Burko’s “Politics of Snow II” art exhibit in the basement level of Robertson Hall, which features paintings of mountains vanishing glaciers caused by global warming.