

'Anthropocene': An Ethical Crisis, Not a Geological Epoch

Chris Cuomo

University of Georgia, Athens, GA, United States (cuomo@uga.edu)

The term 'anthropocene' has gained enormous popularity among scientists who believe we are in a global phase distinguished by the extensive and lasting impacts of social activities on Earth's sedimentary record and vital systems. Beyond its widespread informal use, a working group of the International Union of Geological Sciences seeks to formalize the term to name a new geological epoch, implying that the Holocene epoch has ended. I argue that the move to formalize the 'anthropocene' and to declare the demise of the Holocene is premature and ethically misguided, at best, and that the very name 'anthropocene' obscures rather than illuminates the serious moral and political/economic implications of the dire warnings evident in recent stratigraphic and ecological changes.

If human-caused mass extinction and other ecological catastrophes are serious harms, ethical responses are required. Instead, the move to formalize the idea of an 'anthropocene' epoch treats dire ethical warnings as an opportunity to redefine the current dangerous situation as a new status quo.

Have we met our responsibilities to protect Holocene Earth? This presentation will focus on the ethical implications of using the power and discourse of geology to demote Holocene ecological states from their role as the foundational benchmarks for guiding and assessing human relationships with nature and other species. Have geoscientists adequately consulted the biological, ecological and social sciences before declaring the end of the Holocene epoch? Upon what do we base environmental ethics if the Holocene is considered past history?

I will also examine the ethical dimensions of naming the so-called 'anthropocene', asking: who is the presumed 'anthro' in the 'anthropocene'? Are the phenomena identified with the 'anthropocene' (nuclear fallout, mass species endangerment, ocean acidification, fossil fuel pollution, deforestation, mining) definitive accomplishments of the human species? Should the practices and institutions that have created enduring marks in the sedimentary record, and that currently endanger global ecological health, be identified as 'human' rather than colonial, modern, industrial, capitalist, etc.? Rather than asserting that all of humanity is responsible for recent dramatic earth-system changes, and thereby implying that humanity is inevitably dominating and destructive, I argue that more specific and precise analyses and descriptions of the causes and forces behind troubling stratigraphic and ecological signals are required, so as to assess responsibility, take responsibility, and better support and restore the health and resiliencies of Earth's physical and living systems.