EGU21-7652
https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-egu21-7652
EGU General Assembly 2021

The Importance of an Artistic Lens to Assess the Anthropocene

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As the Anthropocene progresses into more and more dire territory, research continues to refine quantifiable, predictive narratives about the changes that will unfold in the very near future — heat waves, droughts, rising seas, and other shifts in climate that threaten aspects of human life worldwide, from agriculture and industry to medicine and human quality of life as a whole. This evolving, cross-referenced narrative should create a perfect warning to correct our course on carbon emissions, our ongoing ecosystem damage from modern agriculture, and other effects tied to current unsustainable practices such as overuse of fossil fuels and reliance on plastic materials.

However, when these science narratives are placed directly in the spotlight of press and social media, they often merge into a large uncompelling whole, much as many unique and attractive bricks together might combine to create a uniform and ominous wall. The end result is audience disengagement in the face of daunting information.

This effect is so substantiated that studies now recommend that science communicators should avoid “intimidating” and “demoralizing” global audiences with vivid Anthropocene scenarios, and instead focus on creating less-threatening “feel-good” engagement that can serve as a bridge to positive public action that supports renewable energy, organic agriculture, and other corrective changes to the societal footprint.

As a professional science communicator, I reject the advice to avoid painting an ever more clear portrait of the Anthropocene: I believe the problem that “demoralizes” the public is not Anthropocene content, but poor presentation, often driven by journalistic trends to sensationalize future apocalyptic scenarios that create titillating fear. Through my work, I rely not so much on creating a fascination with doomsday scenarios but instead create a fascination with the detailed mechanisms by which the Anthropocene is forcing change: by thawing permafrost, threatening forests, destroying biodiversity, all the while showing how these processes fit within the context of deep time. With a rich deep time perspective, viewers can see why the Anthropocene is such a distortion of natural ecosystem services, and how human technology and habits could instead be changed to work within the carrying capacity of earth systems.

In this presentation, I share my science illustration portfolio to explain my unique approach that fuses the charisma of “fine art” approaches using metaphor, hyper-realism, and didactic compositions with new research findings to reach beyond sensationalist Anthropocene imagery

and create a new visual vocabulary for ecosystem research that unites experts and lay public with a common scientific worldview. I have given this personal philosophy of creative science illustration the name “Accurate Passion” and employ it for a range of topics and clients, including my in-house colleagues at a university research center focusing on ecosystem science, and graduate-level students of my university-level science illustration courses for the past three years.