

Book Review: Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity

Lauren Trevisan

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/sdlp>

 Part of the [Environmental Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Trevisan, Lauren. "Book Review: Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity." *Sustainable Development Law & Policy*, Spring 2010, 55-56.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Washington College of Law Journals & Law Reviews at Digital Commons @ American University Washington College of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Sustainable Development Law & Policy* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ American University Washington College of Law. For more information, please contact fbrown@wcl.american.edu.

BOOK REVIEW

BOOK REVIEW: STORMS OF MY GRANDCHILDREN: THE TRUTH ABOUT THE COMING CLIMATE CATASTROPHE AND OUR LAST CHANCE TO SAVE HUMANITY

by James Hansen

Reviewed by Lauren Trevisan*

In the recently released *Storms of My Grandchildren*,¹ NASA physicist James Hansen presents analyses that have led the majority of the global scientific community to conclude that climate change is not only real, but also a danger to posterity. The book, which is Hansen's first, chronicles the last eight years of his journey as a government scientist interacting with policymakers and increasingly, with the public. He describes how his growing concern about the hazards of inaction led him to leave the comfort of the laboratory and enter the public sphere. Despite disappointing interactions with politicians, censorship by the Bush administration, and criticism for his tenacity, Hansen has maintained his unyielding and optimistic view that humanity can avert the most extreme consequences of climate change. However, he makes it very clear: we must act now to do so.

Hansen's story begins on his sixtieth birthday, March 29, 2001, the day he was invited to attend the first meeting of the Vice President's Climate Task Force. Hansen was optimistic going into the meeting, taking his invitation as a sign that the Bush administration planned to make good on its campaign promises to reduce carbon dioxide. However, this meeting, and several other cabinet-level presentations, proved to be disappointments; Hansen's urgent recommendations were cherry-picked or ignored completely. Evidencing his bipartisan approach to politics, Hansen does however give credit where credit is due. After his initial meetings with the Bush administration, the White House did take steps to reduce methane emissions and regulate soot from cars and trucks; however, the administration dismissed Hansen's urgent call for carbon dioxide reductions.

In part, Hansen attributes the Bush administration's inaction to simultaneous presentations given by Dr. Richard Lindzen, whom Hansen calls the "dean of global warming contrarians." Hansen's difficulty in being pitted against Lindzen in those meetings seems to epitomize the broader environmental

and scientific communities' difficulties in confronting climate skeptics. Hansen explains that "Lindzen makes qualitative statements that sound reasonable, and he raises technical matters that a layperson cannot assess, making it sound like there is an argument among theorists." Hansen addresses and clarifies these perceived inconsistencies and identifies them as part of the motivation behind political inaction.


Although the perceived divide among scientists has lent itself to slow-to-nonexistent policy changes, Hansen devotes a large portion of his book to decry the role of special interests in policy making. Hansen argues that the short-term, profit-driven focus of special interests, in particular the fossil fuel industry, fundamentally conflicts with the long-term solutions needed to deal with climate change. The impact of special interests is part of what drove Hansen to enter the public sphere. He states that "[t]he public, if well informed, has the ability to override the influence of special interests Scientists can play a useful role if they help communicate the climate change story to the public in a credible, understandable fashion." While seemingly straightforward and logical, Hansen's reasoning proved to be highly controversial.

Hansen details his numerous public appearances and the almost instantaneous pushback he received. Despite threats from Bush-era NASA Office of Special Counsel, Hansen went ahead with several presentations on climate change, speaking as a public citizen and not a government employee. Hansen entered the public sphere after being widely quoted in the press for comments about Bush administration censorship of scientific data and disregard for scientific results that went against its prerogatives. Hansen's description of his 2006 *60 Minutes* interview and others gives an insight into the impact his outspoken approach to

*Lauren Trevisan is a J.D. Candidate, May 2012, at American University Washington College of Law.

climate change had within NASA, even prompting the removal of a portion of its mission statement that Hansen used to begin his talks: “to understand and protect our home planet.”

Hansen presents his journey from laboratory scientist, to government advisor, to public advocate, while simultaneously using science to explain the history, differing theories, and alternative future scenarios of climate change. To address climate change effectively, knowledge is key; Hansen endeavors and succeeds in presenting this knowledge in his book. He acknowledges the complexity of the issue, but refuses to allow that to be an obstacle. In the later portion of the book, Hansen provides

recommendations for advocacy: namely increased renewable energy production and energy efficiency, an end to the use of coal, and the use of nuclear energy. For these objectives to be realized requires widespread, active public involvement. Hansen does not disparage politicians or public office; rather, he emphasizes the importance of citizens engaging in the political process and making their voices heard. *Storms of My Grandchildren* is at its core, a call to well-informed action. In the final pages, Hansen juxtaposes photographs of his grandchildren with his urgent and direct message that “[y]ou will need to be a protector of your children and grandchildren . . . [i]t is our last chance.” 

Endnotes: Book Review
