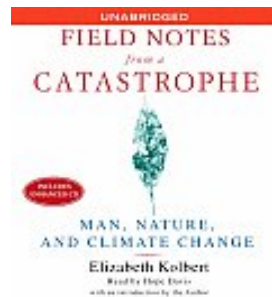


Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change (Abridged)

by Elizabeth Kolbert

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Americans have been warned since the late 1970s that the build-up of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere threatens to melt the polar ice sheets and irreversibly change our climate. With little done since then to alter this dangerous path, the world has reached a critical threshold. By the end of the century, it will likely be hotter than at any point in the last two million years, and the sweeping consequences of this change will determine the future of life on earth for generations to come.

Taking listeners from the melting Alaskan permafrost to storm-torn New Orleans, acclaimed journalist Elizabeth Kolbert approaches this monumental problem from every angle. She interviews researchers and environmentalists, explains the science, draws frightening parallels to lost civilizations and presents the moving tales of people who are watching their worlds disappear. Growing out of an award-winning three-part series for the *New Yorker*, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* brings the environment into the consciousness of the American people and asks what, if anything, can be done to save our planet.

From Scientific American Marguerite Holloway, a contributing editor at *Scientific American*, teaches journalism at Columbia University. <http://www.amazon.com/Field-Notes-Catastrophe-Nature-Climate/dp/1596911255>

In the 1990s the inhabitants of Shishmaref, an Inupiat village on the Alaskan island of Sarichef, noticed that sea ice was forming later and melting earlier. The change meant that they could not safely hunt seal as they had traditionally and that a protective skirt of ice no longer buffered the small town from destructive storm waves. Shishmaref was being undone by a warming world. To survive, the villagers recently decided to move to the mainland. Soon Shishmaref on Sarichef will be gone. Pithy and powerful, the opening of Elizabeth Kolbert's book about global warming, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, echoes that of another book that also originated as a series of articles in the *New Yorker* magazine. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* starts in much the same way, with a fable about a town that lived in harmony with its surroundings and that fell silent. The question is, Can *Field Notes* galvanize a national movement to curb global warming in the same way *Silent Spring* sparked one to curb the use of pesticides? *Silent Spring*'s success as a transformative force came about because of Carson's scientific authority, the way she shaped her argument, the immediate nature of the threat, and the many movements afoot in American society in 1962. Carson was a scientist, and she had credibility when she described how synthetic chemicals, DDT in particular, affect living things. That authority convinced her readers and withstood critics and attacks by the chemical industry. Carson's writing was direct and her rhetoric carefully chosen, as her biographer Linda Lear and other scholars have noted. Carson appreciated Americans' fears about nuclear fallout: something invisible was contaminating their food. She made clear DDT's similar qualities: "No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves." Concerned that her audience might be solely women--mothers worried about the health of their children--she also spoke directly to hunters, outdoorsmen. She deliberately sought, and got, the widest possible reach. Although Carson was describing something people could not see in their food, she was writing about something they could viscerally understand: they saw pesticides being sprayed. They could connect their health with their surroundings, and that kind of connection can lead to powerful activism. It did after *Silent Spring*. It did in the late 1970s in Woburn, Mass., as Jonathan Harr describes in *A Civil*

Action, the story of families whose children were dying of leukemia. It did in 1978 at Love Canal in New York State. It continues to do so in communities around the world. If we can see the problem--in our family, in our neighborhood, in the natural world we are intimate with--it is not necessarily easier to tackle, but it becomes more immediate, more mobilizing. Just as important as Carson's credentials, her literary brilliance and the tangibility of her topic was the time at which she was writing. In the 1960s Americans were energetically exercising their freedom of transformation. As Adam Rome, an environmental historian at Pennsylvania State University, has written, the environmental movement that blossomed after *Silent Spring* owed a great deal to the Democratic agenda set in the mid-1950s, to the growing activism of middle-class women, and to a counterculture raised in fear of the bomb and the planet's end. The power of *Silent Spring* lay in what people and politicians did with it. *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* is not arriving on a similar scene. There is not much widespread U.S. protest about anything--not about the war with Iraq, not about the administration's links to oil and other industry, not about the diminishing of our civil rights. It is strangely quiet here. Americans are also burned out on environmental catastrophism. Many people have noted that with each new catastrophe that has not appeared--the extinction of nearly everything by the end of last year and food shortages, to mention two examples--doomsayers have lost more of their clout and their audience. The problems grow, but apathy has set in. Kolbert is also writing about something most of us cannot see clearly. Despite reports of melting glaciers, changing ecology, shorter winters and other critical indicators, global warming remains hard to grasp. We can see breast cancer cases on Long Island. We can see high asthma rates in inner cities. And we can see nongovernmental organizations struggling on those fronts. We are not good at seeing big, wide and far away; our sense of scale has not evolved in tandem with the scale of our lives. And yet. After Katrina, newspapers around the country explored the question of whether there was a link between the ferocity of the hurricane and global warming. (Answer: No one hurricane's force can be attributed to global warming, but trends of increasing intensity might, in time.) Maybe climate change is becoming more personal to more Americans--those in the lower 48. Kolbert's book contributes more important images for us to personalize. Fairbanks, Alaska, is losing its foundation; as the permafrost melts, huge holes are opening in the earth, under houses, in front yards. Twenty-two English butterfly species have shifted their ranges to the cooler north. The Dutch are busy developing amphibious houses. Burlington, Vt., has tried to reduce energy consumption and has been only modestly successful; without national political will, any one plan hits a wall. *Field Notes* has scientific authority as well. Kolbert is not a scientist, but she reports regularly on science, and she may well have talked to every researcher on the planet studying global warming. There are names and characters in *Field Notes* that even a climate-change obsessive may not have seen in other press articles or books. It can get dizzying at times. Yet the enduring impression is of deep, sober, rooted authority--the same impression *Silent Spring* conveys. The book is a review of the scientific evidence and of the failure of the politicians we chose. The details are terrifying, and Kolbert's point of view is very clear, but there is no rhetoric of rant here. She is most directly editorial in the last sentence of the book, and by that point, she has built the case. Other books on global warming have not had much widespread social or political effect. There have been many--and even *Field Notes* arrives at the same time as *The Winds of Change*, by Eugene Linden (Simon & Schuster), and *The Weather Makers*, by Tim Flannery (Atlantic Monthly Press). In 1989 the much celebrated *The End of Nature*, by Bill McKibben, for example, catalyzed debate--is nature really ending?--but not a national movement. Perhaps *Field Notes* can't make a movement where there's little concentrated activist juice. But something about this book feels as though it might. For a friend of mine, Kolbert's *New Yorker* series was an awakening--the first time, she said, she really understood what was happening and why we must act. Let's hope this powerful, clear and important book is not just lightly compared to *Silent Spring*. Let's hope it is this era's galvanizing text.