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Hot debate

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Springfield High School chemistry teacher Don Goff has been following the global warming debate for several years, and says "it really comes down to the fact that there's no conclusive evidence."

University of Illinois Springfield professor Jim Bonacum disagrees, pointing to phenomena at home and abroad. And at Glenwood High School, physics and astronomy teacher Laurie O'Brien says she doesn't make a point of discussing global warming, but notes the topic comes up when her students study the atmospheres of planets, including Earth.

As grownups continue to debate what changes in the Earth's temperature mean, many Springfield students believe they have a responsibility to protect the environment, even as teachers take a variety of approaches when discussing global warming in the classroom.

Sacred Heart-Griffin sophomore Michael "Mickey" Schaefer said he bases his opinion on several news reports and scientific studies, including former Vice President Al Gore's popular documentary on global warming trends titled "An Inconvenient Truth."

"He is a smart guy, but he never really had a chance. If he was the president, our environmental standards would be much higher," Michael said. "At the same time, though, his opinion on the effects (seemed) a bit drastic."

And there is where the debate lies.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency's website dedicated to climate change, the average temperature of earth's surface has increased by 1.2 to 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit over the past 100 years. While that may not seem like much, scientists believe that this increase in temperature may cause global changes in rainfall, weather patterns and sea level.

Alaska has already seen changes believed to have been caused, at least in part, by greenhouse gas emissions and global warming.

"Scientists are certain that human activities are changing the composition of the earth's atmosphere," according to the website.

However, in the same paragraph: "(The scientists) are not sure by how much (the climate) will change, at what rate it will change, or what the exact effects will be."

Goff said he believes media reports have exaggerated the impact human activities have had on Earth.

"All we can say for certain is that the amount of carbon dioxide is increasing," he said.

Instead, he said factors such as deforestation and the amount of carbon dioxide dissolved in the ocean are more likely explanations.

"It's not as clear cut as the mainstream media lets one think," he said. "Some research has shown that it's possible that the earth was warmer in medieval times, long before industrialization, than it is today. I just don't think we've considered all the possibilities."

Another argument

Bonacum, an associate professor of genetics at UIS, says Earth's climate is "definitely changing," and he's been trained to present Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" program.

Bonacum, who holds a doctorate in biology from Yale University, offers evidence from around the world, and right here at home.

"As the oceans warm up, they hold more moisture. More moisture leads to more violent storms. The flooding in Australia, increased typhoons in the Pacific, and even the snow we (in central Illinois) recently encountered are all products of those storms." Bonacum describes the situation as a car rolling down a hill toward a brick wall.

"We have three choices. We can step on the gas, do nothing, or step on the brakes."

Bonacum said his passion for the topic is inspired, in part, because "I feel a tremendous amount of responsibility toward young people, especially working at UIS. My generation is the one that created these problems, and we have left it to the next generation to deal with them and try to solve them."

Springfield High senior Paul Liu, 17, is one of those trying. He is a member of Springfield High's environmental club, which meets regularly to recycle paper and bottles throughout the school.

However, he notes that many teens have other things on their minds than saving the planet.

"I know that it's happening, but there's not that much that people can do about it — teens especially. Teenagers have to worry about

many other things like grades and schoolwork, which leaves little room for global warming.”

In the classroom

Laurie O'Brien, a physics and astronomy teacher at Glenwood High School, takes a different approach when talking about climate change in her classes.

“I don't make it a point to talk about, but rather it comes up as a result of other things,” said O'Brien. “For example, we study the composition and atmospheres of other planets in astronomy, and since we know the most about Earth, we can study changes such as global warming more accurately.”

Another way O'Brien covers global warming is through physics.

“Everything is applied physics, and this is true even for global warming. The amount of heat absorbed or reflected by gases in the atmosphere and the amount of heat the ocean can absorb, two major components in climate change, are both dictated by physics,” O'Brien said.

Sam Mounce is a sophomore at Sacred Heart-Griffin.

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