This photo shows bubbles of methane trapped in lake ice. Photo courtesy of Katey Walter, Institute of Northern Engineering, and the Cherskii Arctic research station, Siberia.

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NO TIME TO RETREAT

Last month over 2,000 climate experts convened in Copenhagen with a common cause — to provide a scientific update to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2007 assessment on global warming. They also shared a common concern that despite the gathering pace of climate change, their message is simply failing to permeate through to policymakers and the public.

Delegates at the International Scientific Conference on Climate Change, held from 10–12 March, heard a grim portrayal of the state of planet, with Arctic summer sea-ice being lost faster and sea-level rise expected to be more severe than anticipated just two years ago (*Nature News* doi: 10.1038/news.2009.165; 2009). The take-home message — that only urgent action will give a reasonable chance of avoiding dangerous effects — needs to be conveyed more clearly now than ever before. Despite the political will garnered since the IPCC's last report, the economic downturn could well make a damp squib of efforts to agree a meaningful global climate deal in December.

But rather than encouraging more engagement with the media, some scientists at the Copenhagen congress called for quite the opposite. Dismayed with the mainstream media's portrayal of the problem, (<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/scidev/123737352260.htm>), congress chair Katherine Richardson (see page 51) from the University of Copenhagen said that a new strategy is needed for communicating climate change, one that sidesteps journalists, and the money-making organizations they work for, entirely.

It is true that the mainstream media has at times served the public poorly on the issue of climate change. Some well respected outlets have occasionally struggled to differentiate issues of consensus from those where there is legitimate contention. Even worse, there have been deliberate efforts to misreport the facts, such as by the *Telegraph's* Christopher Booker in the UK. But even though the role of human activity in recent warming is clearly established — and media coverage ought to reflect that — there is still plenty of discussion on the exact action needed. Here, impartial and measured reporting still has a crucial part to play, one that can not be undertaken by those involved in the process. How else can the public be informed of the pros and cons of carbon trading, or on the perverse incentives of certain mitigation efforts?

Authorities on climate change are irreplaceable in informing the media, whether they do so by being a reliable source for science reporters, by writing op-eds in mainstream newspapers or by contributing to blogs. With recent cuts in core science reporting staff, such as those at CNN, it is especially vital that scientists continue this service to society. It would be better still if they combined this with more direct communication through avenues such as blogs, which are becoming increasingly important resources for reporters and interested citizens (*Nature* **458**, 274–277; 2009). But such efforts should be seen as complementary to, rather than as a replacement for, mainstream media. By embracing both, scientists may well see their messages begin to permeate more effectively.

OLIVE HEFFERNAN, EDITOR

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