

Copper Queen Library hosts environmental philosopher for community lecture

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Matthew Goodwin, Northern Arizona University environmental ethics professor, gives a philosophy lecture at the Copper Queen Library in Bisbee on Jan. 9

Photo by Mark Levy

Matthew Goodwin doesn't think climate change is just a science issue. When it comes to the evolving environment, for Goodwin, it's up to the community to take responsibility for the future — moral responsibility.

That was one of the main messages Goodwin outlined during his lecture at the Copper Queen Library on Jan. 9. Goodwin, a Northern Arizona University philosophy professor who specializes in environmental ethics, visited the Bisbee library as part of the Arizona Humanities — a statewide nonprofit dedicated to community education through free programming — lecture series. His talk focused on how the community as a whole plays an important role in addressing environmental issues.

“It's about what we think is important in the world,” Goodwin said during his lecture.

The impacts of climate change won't affect humans as much as it will impact wildlife, he said. With the current emission rates from the earth's top greenhouse-gas producers — like the U.S. and China — Goodwin cited studies reporting that the planet is in the middle of a sixth mass extinction as a result of human activity.

One 2015 study published in Science Advances magazine conducted by researchers from Stanford University, the University of California in Berkeley, Princeton University, the University of Florida in Gainesville and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México found that vertebrate species are dying at a rate 100 times higher than the background rate — or the normal extinction rate — in the last century alone. Researchers noted that this rate of extinction indicates the sixth mass extinction is underway.

This, Goodwin argued, can have an impact on the future of wildlife education.

“The real issue here is that we are keeping the future generations from having these experiences,” he said. “I think we will be fine, the people will survive this, but the people who do survive this will no longer have this experience (to see certain wild animals).”

The effects of emissions extend beyond the environment, Goodwin said. The top emitters, which are some of the most powerful countries in the world, are less vulnerable to negative climate impacts compared to less developed countries, according to a 2015 study published by researchers from the U.S. and Australia.

The study found that the majority of countries left vulnerable to negative effects of climate change were islands in the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and African nations. The countries most impacted produce a fraction of the emissions released by the top three emitters, the study reported.

“It's not just a climate issue,” Goodwin said. “It's a social justice issue.”

Sylvia Morrell, a Bisbee resident who attended the lecture, said she thinks it's important for community members to have open philosophical conversations about the environment. Lectures like Goodwin's, she said, can help locals be more aware of their impact on the environment their peers.

“You want to make a good decision, you want to be conscious,” she said.

Alison Williams, assistant program coordinator for the Copper Queen Library, said climate talks in the community can foster broader conversations about awareness not only about Bisbee, but also about the world.

“If we don't address it, we don't leave our children with a brighter future,” she said.

Williams agreed with Goodwin and calls for a community effort in addressing environmental issues as a whole.

“While moral responsibility happens on the individual level, the individuals make up the collective whole,” she said. “I think that each decision that we make on the government level is informed by the community.”