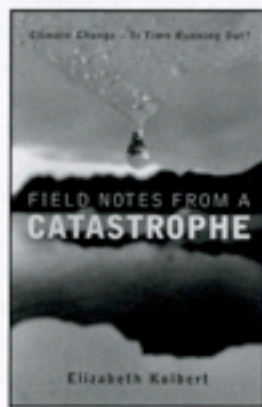


I knew global warming was bad. I knew that we needed to change. But like many of us, I didn't know the specifics. In her new book, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, Elizabeth Kolbert balances an information deficit on the topic by providing a beautifully written, first-hand accounting of the situation. Without doubt, the author is a vital teacher in tenuous times. The expansive treatise on global warming, begun as a series of articles for the *New Yorker*, follows Kolbert around the world on a quest for information, examples and answers.

In education lingo, she is adept at making content accessible. Given the



breadth and scope of information presented, this is a formidable task. How does one explain that bit by bit, day by day, we are chipping away

at the Earth's ability to function as a sustainable atmosphere? Kolbert asks the right questions and takes us along for the ride. From Shishmaref, an Inuit village in Alaska whose land is receding, to the Cloud Forest in Costa Rica where the golden toad became extinct, she blends anecdote, observation and explanation to elucidate the phenomenon of global warming. Precise language and direct style only include technical terms where necessary, making the analysis both accessible and complete. But Kolbert does not shy away from complexities, such as a series of organic feedback loops that speed the warming process and climate reactions that could elicit floods and drought.

Perhaps most importantly, she

reviews

makes us privy to experiences and responses through small but significant details of her travels. While at a research station in Greenland, she notices that snow under her tent is melting into a large puddle. She tries, but fails, to clean it up, concluding, "the puddle was too big, and eventually I gave up." It is sad and frustrating. Poetic details like this one convey emotional resonance and humanize the problem.

In the second, longer portion of the book, Kolbert painstakingly lays out the hard realities of a civilization that is knowingly defeating itself. The carbon dioxide emissions resulting from cars, electricity, and even something as simple as turning on your coffee pot, accelerate the heating process. As an American, I read with a hard heart that we contribute 25 percent of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. But harsh realities are tempered by potential solutions. We learn that mayors in the United States are banding together to try to meet or beat environmental standards, and several scientists discuss alternate energy sources. One of these, Robert Socolow, emphasizes that change is not a matter of practicality, but one of choice. Of the solutions he proposes, he says, "These things can all be done."

Other species have altered the atmosphere, and other cultures have ended because of it. But Kolbert points out that "we are the first species to be in a

position to understand what we are doing." We only have one Earth. It isn't disposable and we can't afford to lose it. Yet every day, we are getting a little bit closer to doing just that. Will we choose to change before it's too late? ☸

— Annie Buckley

