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George Woodwell, speaker

Karen Cedzo, moderator

Series: University focus

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Karen Cedzo said one of the more important issues facing scientists during this decade is the potential effect of increasing levels of carbon dioxide on climate. A conference held at the University of Alaska Fairbanks was the first to include both physical and social scientists in their discussion of the CO₂ problems. Nationally and internationally recognized scientists participated in the two-day conference in an effort to share data and the latest theories that might help resolve CO₂ problems. George Woodwell emphasized the complexity of the problem. He said there is no question that the CO₂ content of the atmosphere is increasing. The increase is significant and scholars of this subject believe that over the next couple of decades the effect of the increase will outstrip the effect of the various other factors that influence the temperature of the Earth and become dominant. The potential for a significant warming of the Earth in the next decade perhaps before the end of the century is real enough. There will be poleward migration of climatic zones, displacement of the natural vegetation of the Earth and a displacement of agriculture. In longer terms of a century or so it seems to have a potential for an increase in the level of disease and coastal flooding. Woodward talked about the increase challenge of CO₂ increases and politics. Availability of resources is always a political issue, but as we move into a period when populations are expected to grow to six billion in the next eighteen years or so and grow beyond the availability of resources. The intensification of the use of those resources will become an even greater political issue. There is no way to avoid the politics of the CO₂ problem. Scientists have the potential to help the decision makers lessen the impact of the problem. There is a different standard to apply to political decisions. As citizens they face a dilemma. As scientists they face a fascinating puzzle. They are there to look at that puzzle and to decide which aspects can be resolved by the scientific community. Cedzo said at the end of the proceedings it was clear that no one had all the answers. Much more research is needed to better judge the seriousness of the situation and to provide government leaders with information to make long range decisions. Dr. Woodwell is with the Ecosystems Center at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole.

Karen Cedzo reports on the campus calendar and activities.