

Climate and Culture Emergency Cohort Contribution

Submitted to the Emeritus College Newsletter, September, 2025, and to
Emeritus College Council, September 17, 2025.

We have been asked to provide an overview of the Climate and Culture Emergency Cohort since its initiation in 2021. Many Emeriti are new to the history of the cohort and significant evolution of the scholarly emphasis of the program has occurred.

1. Academic Year 2021-22

In June of 2021, Olav Slaymaker asked for advice from leading UBC climate change researchers about how we Emeriti might address the climate change emergency. The “emergency” looked rather different at the time as the COVID 19 epidemic was overwhelming and many of us still perceived the issue of climate change to be primarily a biophysical problem. On the basis of responses received, he decided to convene a cohort of 9 experts from the faculties of Arts, Community Planning, Education, and Science. Our first collective action was to invite 8 specialists to present the latest developments in their fields relevant to what they perceived as aspects of the climate change emergency. From September, 2021-May, 2022, interested Emeriti listened to a series of lectures on the climate change emergency from the perspective of Indigenous leaders, engineers, political scientists, forest wildfire experts, Provincial government medical scientists, fisheries scientists, legal specialists and atmospheric scientists. The Emeritus College provided travel funding for two of the experts.

Representative Questions asked

Is climate change a problem that can be solved by reducing the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere?

What are the implications of ‘overshoot’ for the fate of planet Earth, Canada’s future well-being and BC’s higher education system?

2. Academic Year 2022-23

The cohort realized that the climate change emergency was of such urgency that we wrote directly to the Senior Administration of UBC on February 15, 2022. The letter was signed by the 9 cohort members expressing concern that in spite of the exemplary bioclimatic monitoring network on the campus, UBC was in danger of perpetuating the “business as usual” approach, an approach that had already been roundly criticized by the respected Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, and that the emergent polycrisis concerned much more than the counting of changing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere.

A series of meetings between cohort members and the Senior Administration followed in the Fall of 2022, and we soon found that we had come face to face with the UBC 2050 Vision planners, who were wedded to rates of growth of the campus infrastructure that diverted our attention from the immediate global crisis. Members of the cohort addressed the UBC Board of Governors with their concerns. There followed, in the spring of 2023, a number of conclusions from 9 months of discussion by all 9 cohort members:

1. ‘Complexity’ characterizes the interdependence of humanity and environment

2. A new mindset is needed to take 'degrowth' and 'overshoot' seriously as explicit constraints on future growth
3. The phasing out of fossil fuel use over time is required
4. BC and Canada's subsidizing of species extinction should be questioned
5. The differential social impact of climate change on impoverished communities, especially First Nations, is a matter of injustice that requires reparation

Representative Questions asked

UBC is an institution that is seriously underfunded by the Provincial government, and yet it advertizes a 2050 Vision that ignores the option of a socially just contraction of the human enterprise. Does UBC have a moral obligation to enable future generations to thrive?

Many students are distressed by the increasing global ecological disaster. Would it not be wise to focus on the campus itself as a model for the potential of addressing the question of degrowth?

3. Academic Year 2023-24

Culture and climate change became the new foci of our cohort, with an emphasis on culture. Coincidentally, during 2022/23, a report entitled "Moving with Storms" was prepared at the former PWIAS under the Interim Directorship of Vanessa Andreotti. A number of cohort members participated in the writing/editing of this report, and many of its conclusions closely complemented those of our cohort, notably

1. The Climate and Nature Emergency is a 'super-wicked' challenge: hyper-complex and multi-layered.
2. Human complicity in systemic harm is self-evident
3. Intergenerational dynamics are commonly ignored
4. Humanity must choose between "collective suicide or collective action" (Guterres, 2022)
5. Transforming patterns of thinking, feeling, relationship building, exchanges, and our relationship with the planetary cycles are demanding challenges

Frank Tester produced the inter-generational film 'Voice' which, under the chairmanship of Vanessa Andreotti, explored reasons for the absence of certain voices from the climate polycrisis. A copy of this film is available to Emeriti on Vimeo.

Representative Questions asked

The Moving with Storms report of 2023 considers a number of models that question the validity of the "business as usual model". Have any of these models been applied on the campus?

Although the end of our infinite growth-focused society could occur in a singular, short-lived event, it seems more likely that it will occur over a significant time period of time such as decades, centuries or even (improbably) millennia in specific local, regional, national or global settings. Should UBC focus on providing hope for future spaces or generations?

4. Academic Year 2024-25

Frank Tester produced a second inter-generational film 'All My Relations' which, under the chairmanship of Siila Watt-Cloutier, considered ways in which persons from different cultural backgrounds live with the world of nature, especially those of First Nations heritage. A copy of this film is also available to Emeriti on Vimeo. Bill Rees wrote a foundational statement, describing the root causes of the climate change and culture emergency, and proposing that UBC consider funding a major international conference on the topic, including follow-up actions. The cohort acknowledged the Spring/Summer publication of the UBC Magazine by Alumni UBC entitled 'Will Democracy Endure?' This publication addressed several questions previously raised by the cohort, demonstrated the range of relevant research on-going in individual departments but failed to interrogate the coherence of UBC's overall strategy in dealing with the climate polycrisis.

The Emeritus College generously contributed \$25,000 and PWIAS \$10,000

Representative Questions asked

What might the global mainstream learn from Indigenous and other communities that already thrive in a no growth steady state?

How has higher education contributed to the climate change and culture crisis?

5. Academic Year 2025-26

Our cohort requested funding to cover the costs of funding two more films: 'Limits to the Technical Fix' and 'Grief, Anxiety, Despair, Collective Fatigue and Hope', but PWIAS had by this time been regrettably closed for inter-generational initiatives and the University Budget was under severe stress.

Nevertheless, the cohort looks forward to positive discussions with Janice Stewart on the climate change and culture theme, commencing in late September, 2025. Bob Woollard has been the initiator of these discussions.

The Emeritus College granted the cohort an additional \$5,000 and a part of this is projected to be spent on presentations to UBC's Climate Emergency Week in November, 2025

Representative Questions asked

What are the limits to the technical fix?

What are the sources of hope in a time of extremely stressful climate change?

6. Academic Year 2026-27

The cohort plans to continue to promote inter-generational initiatives and plans to complete the third of the films identified above ('Limits to the Technical Fix') with partial funding from the Emeritus College and other external sources, such as the Knowledge Network

Representative Questions will ask

What can be done about the widening wealth gap?

How can we live well on this planet without destroying it?

7. Cohort Membership

The Climate and Culture Emergency Cohort has consisted of 7-9 Emeriti during the past five years. Jo-Ann Archibald, William Rees, Olav Slaymaker, Douw Steyn, Frank Tester and Graeme Wynn have been 'permanent' members; Robert Woollard and John Millar have provided welcome additional fuel over the past two years. Each member of the cohort has contributed from their wide range of academic specialties with humility and brilliance.

Nevertheless, we are conscious of the fact that there are many other Emeriti with comparable or greater expertise and we would welcome expressions of interest in their joining the cohort.

Reported by Olav Slaymaker and Frank Tester on September 4, 2025.