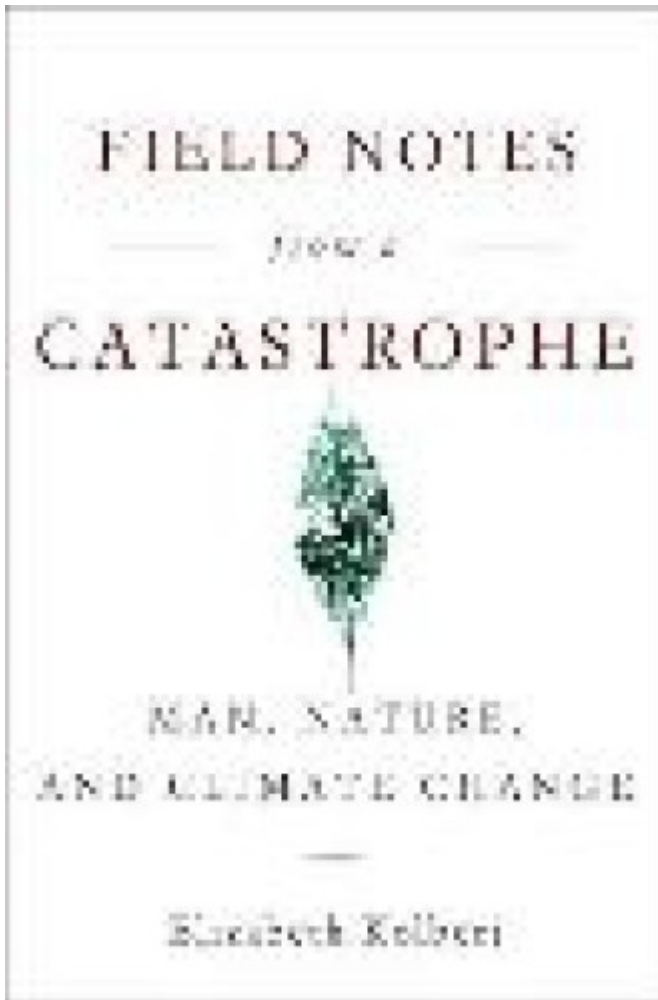


Field Notes from a Catastrophe

reviewed by [Kenneth H. Carter Jr.](#) in the [November 14, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change

Elizabeth Kolbert
Bloomsbury

The year 1998 had the highest average global temperature on record, 2002 had the second highest, 2001 was third and 2004 ranked fourth. At a recent symposium honoring the 35th anniversary of the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency, the six most recent agency heads—five of them appointed by Republicans—accused the Bush administration of ignoring the environmental threat posed by global warming. The rising of Earth's temperatures is a tenet affirmed by the scientific communities of the developed countries of the world, and it is reinforced without dissent in the refereed journals of those communities. There may be debate about the appropriate human response to global warming, but there is none about its measurable effects on the present environment.

Over a year ago I read three lengthy articles about global warming in the *New Yorker* by Elizabeth Kolbert. Her writing was at once measured and startling, reflective and urgent. I was moved by the articles, and I returned to them a few months later, after Hurricane Katrina. *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* is based on those articles. The title is perfect. These are carefully made observations from the Arctic Circle and Washington, D.C., from China and Greenland, from the Netherlands and Syria. They describe floating houses, thawing permafrost, receding glaciers, rising temperatures and disappearing species.

Kolbert presents the evidence from as many perspectives as possible. The characters who shape the narrative are the sort of folks who give their lives to camping on glaciers and in deserts, measuring butterfly migration in the United Kingdom and digging up soil samples in the Arctic tundra. They are a diverse and persuasive group of witnesses to an emerging truth, and they speak with conviction, grace and humor. Kolbert notes that usually the public is alarmed about a given issue while scientists are cautious, but that in regard to global warming, the reverse is true: the scientific community is alarmed, while the general public is largely unmoved.

Part of the catastrophe described in these pages is the political response, and here again Kolbert is measured in her observations: she sees the Clinton administration as largely right on the rhetoric but politically unwilling to respond, while the Bush administration has been at times "missing in action," to use John McCain's phrase, and at other times intentionally dishonest and attempting to confuse the public. She also notes the economic perspective: the United States and China are at a standoff on the Kyoto Protocol; neither is willing to act because of competitive pressures in

the global marketplace.

Other questions are posed in the book: Are humans really the cause of global warming? Will the effects of warming be gradual or catastrophic? Can anything really be done, or is it too late? Can humans adapt as they have so often in the past? Is this a crisis in which we have adequate knowledge but lack the will to act?

Kolbert dedicates the book to her three sons, bringing a human face to the problem. I am not aware of anyone who seriously believes that our children and their children will inherit the same planet we have enjoyed. We are changing the environment in catastrophic ways. The choice, Kolbert suggests, is between action in the present and self-destruction in the future.

Carefully recorded field notes can be a vehicle for truth telling, providing an accurate picture of the world for believer and skeptic alike. Global warming is a complex issue, and comprehending it requires scientific literacy. That the matter has been intentionally muddied for short-term political gain makes engagement with this subject all the more difficult and necessary, and Kolbert has presented her field notes masterfully, with a minimum of interpretive annotation.

Pastors and theologians will, of course, view global warming and this book through their own lenses. They might call sin what Kolbert refers to as “dangerous anthropogenic interference.” Kolbert wonders about the paradoxical relationship between our technological advancement on the one hand, and our methodical journey toward planetary destruction on the other. Readers of scripture will remember stories about the great flood, the Tower of Babel and banishment into exile.

Should Christians care about global warming? God cares for us so that we might care for the world, for each other, for all creation. And for our part, to care for the creation is to care for the Creator, and to be concerned for its future is to be in communion with God, who called it all into being and has a destiny for it that is not limited by human imagination or agency.

To live in a throwaway culture is to deny our heritage. To proceed toward a limited future for planet Earth, by sins of either commission or omission, cannot be morally justified stewardship. Our knowledge, poets remind us, differs from wisdom, and our power can be a form of pride. These field notes can help us take a small step toward caring selflessly for the world that God has made, and for the future inhabitants of

our planet.