



Opinion

Talking Point: Warming the hearts of a warming planet

PETER BOYER, Mercury

February 28, 2017 12:00am

 Subscriber only

THE lows and highs, pain and pleasure of fighting the climate fight came to the fore last week when some exceptional people visited Hobart. For nearly 30 years Dutch-born Eelco Rohling, professor of ocean and climate change at the Australian National University and the University of Southampton (UK), has studied how the world's ocean has changed over millions of years.

Every second that passes, Rohling told a Hobart audience last week, Earth's ocean waters are now taking up heat energy from the air equivalent to that produced by four to five Hiroshima-sized atomic bomb blasts, or hundreds of thousands of these bomb blasts every day.

That much ocean heat will have a lasting impact, accelerating overall warming and helping to increase the melt rate of land ice in Greenland and Antarctica. There's nothing we can now do, says Rohling, to stop the ocean rising by about a metre by the end of this century.

The world has already overshoot targets for containing warming to a safe long-term level. Present carbon dioxide concentrations of over 400 parts per million already far exceed anything our species has ever experienced. Yet we continue to pour extra carbon into the air.

Previous warming episodes in the past few million years indicate that in coming centuries the sea will rise at an accelerating rate, displacing millions of people as coastal cities are submerged, says Rohling. That is, unless we decisively cut atmospheric carbon dioxide – a very unlikely prospect.

I've been avoiding disaster rhetoric because it seems unhelpful. The entire campaign for a stronger response to the climate challenge is based on the premise that success is possible. If Rohling didn't shut the door on that aspiration, he came damn close.

At times like this we need something to lift the spirits. Enter Simon Kerr. Humans are complex. Kerr, a Melbourne-based musician and academic, would point out that we have many different ways of dealing with difficulty, including the enjoyment of others' company and creative endeavours. Kerr's "Music for a Warming World" is an eclectic mix of music, science and some inspired thinking around the human condition. His collaborator is Melbourne University law professor Christine Parker.

In a five-venue, four-day tour through southern Tasmania, Kerr, violinist Kylie Morigan and keyboardist Scott Lewis explored the connotations of climate change through voice, guitar, violin, keyboard and some stunning still and moving images. Over 80 minutes, the show explores the science of climate change via a "storm" metaphor, the losses that will inevitably result, how we can fight back through changing ourselves and our society, and how we can still thrive through these challenging times.

There are many great moments and valuable messages throughout the show, but for me its most powerful contribution is its final section, on getting through hard times by using our imagination, living simply, and finding support and inspiration in our own communities. John Hunter, whose efforts brought Rohling and Kerr's ensemble to Hobart, is a semi-retired climate scientist. He said when first introducing the group that he was well out of his comfort zone, but was the first to admit he'd enjoyed himself when the concert was done.

That's the point. The immersive audiovisual experience of Music for a Warming World takes you beyond hard facts to a place where you see things differently. Kerr and his group also opened a door to another, inner, subjective realm of human experience, in which things not believed humanly possible can suddenly become so.

We won't begin to mitigate climate change without the benefits flowing from families, friends, communities and the products of their imagination. May Simon Kerr survive and thrive, to continue to help build the resilience and vision that we need to get through this unholy mess.

Peter Boyer, who began his journalism career at the *Mercury*, has written about climate science for many years. In 2014 he was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for services to science communication.