

Building a career in climate change: follow your dreams or follow the money?

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is reputed to have said 'If in one hundred years I am only known as the man who invented Sherlock Holmes, then I will have considered my life a failure.' Many would consider creating one of the most iconic and enduring fictional characters of the modern era a job well done, and I find it difficult to imagine what Doyle could have done to top that achievement. My own ambitions for my career in climate change research, to awaken humanity to the tasks involved in living and flourishing in a carbon constrained world, are equally lofty. However, there is at least one big difference between me and Conan Doyle - my ambitions are simply that. I haven't actually achieved my goals.

Still, I try not to be too hard on myself. After all it's not easy trying to save humanity. And, as a working class lad from a single parent family, the first from my family to go to university, I feel blessed to now be working as a Research Fellow at the University of Oxford. But no one wants to read about someone else's achievements - we all much prefer stories of failure, doubt and struggle. Fear not, there is plenty of that in the situation I am now facing. And it is the questions posed by the challenges I now face, that many academic researchers face, which I wanted to briefly share.

Unless you are a Professor you will be working on a fixed term contract. The only question is, how long is the contract? The longer the better, ideally three to five years. I have been working on one year contracts which, I have belatedly learnt, means no sooner have you started one contract then you need to begin looking for the next contract. I love my work, which means I get obsessed with it, give my all to it. And I am starting to see a pattern. This time I have done better; with three months to go I have been able to lift my head from my desk, look to the future and realise I am in trouble. Last time it was with about 6 weeks to go and I was just able to rescue the situation. At least I thought I had done better this time round. Unfortunately, I am learning some hard lessons the hard way. I have grand, humanity saving plans afoot which will, if I get the funding, keep me safely employed for three years. But I may not get the money, and even if I do I won't get the money for a while yet. Which all means that even the best case scenarios will see me resting between jobs as it were. So you can see, as far as astute and intelligent career planning goes, I am no Sherlock Holmes.

So what does one do? The research that interests me is the biggest climate change question – how much is too much climate change, and who gets to decide? Most of the climate change research assumes that question has been answered to everyone's satisfaction – two degrees is too much. Except when you talk to the experts, like I have, no one can give you an answer to that question. We don't know enough about future climate change impacts and even if we did they will be too varied across the globe, and vulnerability is too heterogeneous, for anyone to objectively define one single dangerous limit.

People who know about this stuff and who I have worked with agree with me that in the next few years this question of how much is too much is going to blow up in everyone's faces and be the climate change story. But at the moment it is easier for policymakers to stick to the two degrees is a safe limit storyline. So, how long do I wait for the world to wake up? Or do I give up waiting, and do something else about climate change? Or is the need to earn a living such that I should give up all together?

Of course, the need for money trumps everything. But if I am not going to keep asking the questions about two degrees, who is?

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