

SIXTY SECOND INTERVIEW: MICHAEL FISH

Michael Fish, 62, recently retired as Britain's, and possibly the world's, longest serving broadcast meteorologist. He joined the Met Office in 1962, has written numerous articles on travel and weather and has acted as consultant for several meteorological books. Famously, and incorrectly, remembered for failing to forecast the Great Storm of 1987, he now gives lectures, writes articles and publicises climate change on behalf of Government agencies.

What one single thing convinces you most that climate change is taking place?

Apart from anything else, just looking out of the window at the moment convinces me. The trees are still looking fabulous and the flowers are still in bloom. It is November and winter has not yet arrived.

In what way will climate change affect our lives most in the next ten years?

The Stern Report makes it clear that climate change is going to make a big difference and makes a case for some form of additional taxation to make sure British people don't waste energy and fuel. Also we will probably be using our cars much less frequently in the years ahead and spending a lot less time travelling.

What is the most important thing you personally are doing on climate change?

I think I did it many years ago. Climate change is not new. The scientific community first recognised global warming well over 100 years ago and I have certainly been aware of it ever since I have been working. About 35 years ago, I made sure that I did everything possible. My house is insulated in every way. I have energy-efficient light bulbs and I have done everything to make our home environmentally-friendly. I certainly do not use my car anywhere near as much as I used to and I have recently bought a bike.

What is the most important thing that every one of us can do to make a difference?

Every little helps. People should spend a little bit of money on insulating their home or changing their light bulbs. These things don't have to cost a lot and some of them will save on power costs as well. More people will be killed by global warming than have been killed in any single human conflict. We all have a responsibility to do something about it.

If you were the Prime Minister or US President what one thing would you do about climate change?

As Prime Minister, I would take at least half the buses off the road in London. They cause the most dreadful pollution and make it difficult to go shopping in Oxford Street, because the fumes are so appalling. The other thing I would have done many years ago as Prime Minister is to build many more nuclear power stations. As US President, I would say it is about time to bash heads together

and sign up to the Kyoto Protocol. Something also has to be done to stop people driving around in these huge Hummers.

Do you agree with the Bishop of London that “making selfish choices, such as flying on holiday or buying a large car, are a symptom of sin”?

I didn't know he said that and I'm not sure what he's saying about it now. I don't think flying on holiday or buying a large car is the same as committing a sin. It may prey on our conscience, but I'm not sure that all things that prey on our consciences are necessarily sins. People should certainly have a conscience about how often they do these things though, or whether they need to do them at all.

There's so much noise about climate change. Are people in danger of becoming complacent about it? What can be done to motivate and mobilise them?

I was a bit shocked by some of the voxpop reactions to the Stern Report. I would have thought the British public would have more common sense than that and would be only too pleased to make an effort. It's a pity because there are going to be more and more people whose lives are directly affected by climate change. What can be done? I don't know. Maybe a few more dramatic floods will get the message across. It may take something major to get the message home.

How will climate change alter the business environment? How should it affect business travel and company car policies, for example?

I've never worked in a business environment. I have always been a civil servant. However, if companies have got any sense, they will cut back on business travel and company cars. I've always thought company cars are pretty horrific and totally unnecessary. Fuel costs have got to go up and that will increase business costs, but companies can also offset this by making energy savings and by doing things like generating their own electricity.

What's in it for business to adapt their models to climate change? How will that benefit them? What are the risks if they do not?

If the Stern Report is right and we are going to lose 20% of Gross Domestic Product, some companies could go out of business.

Are the UK and US Governments doing enough to raise awareness and tackle the issue of climate change?

If you had asked me last month I would have said no, but now we have the Stern Report, which I think is doing a pretty good job at increasing publicity around this issue. The Government has put climate change on the agenda, but I would not say it has done enough. There are not enough councils getting involved in green energy and recycling. This Government also seems to have a

reluctance to spend money on science. Take the Met Office, for example. The Government will not put in the funding that would be very valuable in helping to make accurate forecasts.

In your opinion, to what extent are current extreme weather patterns and events, such as the hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico, the direct result of climate change?

Nobody can point to one particular instance and say it has happened because of climate change or global warming but there is 100% evidence that climate change is taking place and it's taking place at an accelerating rate. The glaciers are melting, the tundra is melting and sea levels are rising. These are all things that can be seen to be related to climate change. Some glaciers have virtually disappeared over the past ten years. The evidence is there and you simply cannot ignore it.

Given that we are likely to see more extreme weather patterns in the foreseeable future, how can we better forecast and prepare for extreme weather-related events?

The Met Office is pretty good at doing what it does, but the Government is not investing enough money in forecasting future weather patterns. The rate of climate change is one of the most difficult things to forecast and we must ensure we invest in technology and monitoring equipment to make sure we can forecast these things effectively and accurately. It won't be possible to prevent them from happening, but we can certainly prevent loss of life and can do much to prevent the loss of property. With the right investment, there's no reason why we cannot do this in the years ahead.