

WITH Sonja Boehmer-Christiansen, Geomorphologist



Dr. Sonja Boehmer-Christiansen, Ph.D. is an Emeritus Reader in Geography at the University of Hull in Kingston-upon-Hull, England where she taught environmental policy and politics. She was born in Dresden East Germany then moved to Adelaide, South Australia where she obtained a research degree in geomorphology while also studying German literature and a bit of economics and geology. Her Ph.D. thesis was on the limits to the international control of marine pollution. She has been editor of [Energy and Environment](#) since 1996. The publication, an "interdisciplinary journal aimed at natural scientists, technologists and the international social science and policy communities" (ISSN 0958-305X), is published 8 times a year and has 20 internationally-located members on its editorial advisory board. Of the journal she says that "The focus is on energy policy debates in relation to the numerous environmental 'concerns' that have surfaced in recent decades." Dr. Sonja Boehmer-Christiansen was a conference attendee [at the Heartland Institute's 4th International Climate Change Conference](#) held in Chicago May 16-18th, 2010. The Frontier Centre was one of 64 international co-sponsors of this event which profiled the work of 73 scientists, economists and policy experts from 23 countries.

Frontier Centre: Can you tell us a little about your professional background and why you became interested in the climate change issue?

Sonia Christianson: I started with a master's degree level in physical geography and became a geomorphologist. Then I did a social science Master's Degree in England and a Doctorate in International Relations researching into environmental issues in international and also national politics - how 'the environment' was taking up in politics and international affairs in particular. I did a PhD on marine pollution control in the Law of the Sea negotiations and then did a lot of research on acid rain after having been in Munich Institute for International Law for 2.5 years. So the research in acid rain was done together with energy economists and I realized how the emission modelers or emission control people were linked to energy policy debates. Then suddenly in the late 80's, almost seamlessly, the acid rain debate merged - top down from Brussels - into the global warming one, with CO2 as the new culprit. The same people applied for research grants, the environmental lobby became suddenly globalized having previously been primarily organized locally and regionalized.

FC: You're from originally what was East Germany and you say you're from the political left. How are you from the political left?

SC: I was brought up by Communists and I had to face, at the age of 14, the confrontation with the West. I had met nice Communists, I had met nice Capitalists, if you'd like. So I had to make up my mind where I stood on these things. When I married an Australian, I married into a very left wing, highly academic, intelligent family in Australia which was very close with Maoist China, so again I heard a lot of ideas and interpretations from the Left. But of course I made my own observations and observed how these environmental issues were being politicized and misused by ideologues on all sides, and especially by bureaucracies to expand their powers. So it's not so much a state that I'm worried about bureaucracies at all level taking on issues where they don't actually have to do much, just make regulations and policies, and collect taxes. They can plan more, pass more laws and make more regulations and, as in Europe where the bureaucracy of the European Community, can take

away competences from the national and local level in the name of environmental protection.

I didn't like it. I also know that the environmentalists, and I was one of them once, have become a dangerous force – dehumanizing in fact. When I had children who grew up in this atmosphere of future doom, I realized I didn't want to bring them up with such a negative view of mankind. From my science knowledge I realized that the underlying assumption of environmentalism - that wilderness and nature without human beings are good; and any change from that 'natural state' is degrading or negative – was wrong. I think we should start, like the great German author and poet Goethe, with a garden as our normal state. If Nature is a garden, then we humans have to maintain it, care for it.

FC: So why does the present approach to global warming and climate change bother you as someone from the social-democratic left?

SC: It's just my experience in Europe. There are so many very good people, very intelligent people who are totally sold, until recently anyway, on the global warming threat. They really believe they need to save the planet, they really believe that to protect their children and grandchildren they have to reduce their carbon footprint. I think unless we split some people off from large group, we cannot win this battles again 'climate alarmism' and forced decarbonisation, in fact enhanced poverty. If you look at the distribution of political beliefs I just don't think the political Right, certainly not in Europe, can win against 'environmentalism'.... The Right in Europe is actually very green anyway. To oppose climate alarmism you have to have a broad political alliance. You cannot say what somebody just said to me "I'll be for this." I'm a bit frightened by what I've observed here in America, the anger and the lack of comprehension of socialism. Socialism is not communism and socialism in its stark form is much more individual anti-liberty than social democracy. People know very little of what actually happens in Europe.

FC: Do you think humans are causing global warming?

SC: To be very honest I'm agnostic on this. I don't have the evidence. I mean I have lots of contradictory evidence but I do think, from my experience on ocean pollution and all the other pollution hypes, that when it goes to the political

phase there are huge exaggerations. Once bureaucracies get regulatory and taxation powers, the exaggerations decline, scares may even be forgotten. So I honestly believe that there may be a problem but that this problem also has beneficial sides. We know how positive carbon dioxide is to life. So I do think there's much exaggeration (of the man-made warming threat), of the negative aspects, for political reasons. So that's why I'm here (at this Conference). I do think the skeptical scientists are more honest and more truthful than those funded by governments to support the IPCC.

FC: Quite a few of our politicians are very frightened to engage in this debate properly. What would your advice be to those politicians?

SC: Listen more to the common people because the so-called common people like the gardeners I know haven't observed much global warming. I think they must stop worrying so much about the environmentalists -- right and left because they exist on both sides. I know why they like the environmentalists because their pressures encouraged them to make new rules and regulations that someone else can pay for. Politicians need the courage to disassociate themselves from the environmental lobby, but this will take some time. But now is the time I think, with the economic 'down-turn' and debt crisis.

FC: There's definitely a view at this conference that the real agenda of the people behind climate change is to transfer wealth. They feel that their capitalist system and their way of life is threatened by it. How do you feel about that?

SC: I understand that but I just think that when I see how much space and resources these North American countries consume, I have quite a bit of sympathy with the redistribution of wealth idea. I'm also very worried about whether this is done wisely and correctly and not through corruption. So I have sympathy for this idea. I also have some sympathy for the United Nations having a greater advisory role in the world. I'm confused myself how this redistribution is best achieved. I think we need to understand Capitalism better and I certainly get the feeling there are quite a few people on the Right as well who are also worried about present day global Capitalism. It also has to be looked at as well as the exaggerated claims of environmentalists. I'm interested in law and a good social system that helps people that don't have all the advantages.

FC: So you're not concerned about "Cap and Trade" and carbon taxes and so on which are part of the solution offered to global warming?

SC: I doubt that they're part of the solution. For example, I ask people to find an economic historian that will show us that a new phase in technological progress, a new phase of development, has been encouraged by making energy deliberately more expensive. I don't think Cap and Trade will have so much force in it and will make energy more expensive for many people. I'm not against the regulation provided it doesn't require the huge amount of subsidization as it does at the moment, e.g. for renewable energy sources that claim to be low carbon. I'm also against the idea, that the state is the best selector of new technologies. From what I can see in Europe, in what is called ecological

modernization, the state decides on what is to be the new green technology and I would rather leave this to the market with only a minimum of regulation.

FC: Do you have issues with, for example, carbon based energy? Germany has lots of coal. We have lots of carbon based energy in North America. A lot of people on the left seem to not like oil or other forms of carbon based energy. Do you think that debate is legitimate?

SC: I don't think it's just the Left. I think it's the environmentalists. I think there's a confusion here, although there has definitely been some merging between environmentalists and Socialists as both want to increase state influence. I don't think it's the Left that is the real problem in the USA, it is the suppression of the Left and its consequent 'escape' into green idealism and dreams. The Left supports environmentalism for lack of anything else, I think. It's really the environmentalists that push this decarbonisation agenda and I would warn people against conflating environmentalism and Socialism, as I have observed here.

FC: In Canada we have the oil sands and a lot of the Greens don't like them. Do you have a view on the oil sands?

SC: I think they should be used provided it doesn't require too much subsidy. On the other hand, with the oil prices being manipulated, I would leave their development to the regulated market, regulated for safety and environmental protection.

FC: So you don't like subsidies for windmills and solar energy like you have in Europe?

SC: No I don't, maybe a little bit initially to help them but I think that's gone on for too long and the subsidies are too large. I think the environmentalists have to some extent taken over part of the machinery of the state to create their imagined green nirvana - and in this they now have many business supported who see competitive advantages and seek investment support.

FC: So you believe in market pricing without subsidies essentially?

SC: Less subsidies rather than more. But I'm aware, of course, that nuclear power wouldn't have it made it without a huge amount of subsidizing. I'm told there are also a lot of subsidies still to assist coal, in some places. So if you get rid of the subsidies on fossil fuels, which some people want, then you help the environment perhaps, but may harm people. In the end it's a political decision. If we live in democracy then the state will every so often have to subsidize something.

FC: Angela Merkel has backed off now on carbon taxes.

SC: Has she? That's news to me. But they are extending the lives of their nuclear power stations. I've felt for a long time that one of the main forces behind the de-carbonization agenda was actually the nuclear industry, which is in serious trouble in Europe. The Germans at least got this extension, many people want to shut down nuclear power completely, but Angela Merkel has said positive things:

about Germany not completely giving up the nuclear adventure.

FC: Where do you see this global warming debate going? There seems to be increasing skepticism.

SC: I think there will be increasing skepticism. But I've always said that as long as politicians saw the environmentalists and the global warming issue as something that furthers their agendas and powers, as long as they felt that they could actually benefit politically from the climate scare, they would stick to it. But I think with the current recession and the Climategate emails that they will now turn to the climate skeptics for justification. [Australia is

an example of what may happen more widely, as so is Canada.]

FC: If you had any advice for the parties of the Left in Canada what would you suggest? They seem to have embraced the idea that man is creating global warming.

SC: Think a bit harder. Listen to the advice which part of the German government has recently received from its advisory council on the economy: namely the national economy is probably going to be more stimulated by adaptation to whatever climate change will actually happen, than by globalized de-carbonization.