Published on *Hillsborough Community College News* (https://news.hccfl.edu) on 09/28/17

HCC in the News: Students from Amsterdam, HCC talk warming waters, hurricanes at a time when everyone should

Terms:

Published Date and Time:
09/28/17

http://www.cltampa.com/news-views/environment/article/20977223/students-from-amsterdam-hcc-talk-water-conversation-at-a-time-when-everyone-should [1]

News Organization:
Creative Loafing

News Organization Location:
Tampa

The Hillsborough Community College Honors Institute unveiled “A Celebration of Water” on Tuesday night, a cross-cultural symposium organized in collaboration with the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. The event brought the Dutch students and teachers to Tampa, to spark a discussion of climate change and its impact on one of humanity's most important resources, water.

After Hurricane Irma created havoc across Florida and the Caribbean and brought the Bay Area to a standstill — not to mention with the unprecedented destruction Harvey and Maria brought to Texas and Puerto Rico, the science behind a changing climate's impact water has been a popular topic of discussion. This was evident in both the large crowd that showed up to HCC's Dale Mabry campus, particularly for an educational event, along with the showpiece talks of the evening.

Margaret Hopson-Fernandes, who teaches biology at HCC, noted how timely Tuesday's event was.

“If you had come just a few weeks earlier, you wold have seen a very different face of Florida,” she said as she greeted the Dutch visitors. “One that most of us don't see that often, but when it rears its ugly head, it's pretty scary. I grew up a Florida native, I grew up on the beach on a barrier island near Jacksonville and I've never been as afraid of a storm as I was of this one.”

Hopson-Fernandes' talk was centered around the question everyone has been asking for the past few weeks: what is causing this year's string of intense hurricanes and why are they so strong?

She attributed the Atlantic Ocean being a hotbed of hurricanes this season largely to a lack of an El Nino, which brings winds from the west that usually fend off some hurricanes and tropical storms which, along with the rising temperature of the waters, creates lower air pressure and moister air, the conditions for hurricanes to grow and intensify.

While Hopson-Fernandes decried climate change as being treated as an unmentioned elephant in the room by government officials and meteorologists during these past storms, she made clear that it wasn't the sole cause of the hurricanes.

“I can't stand in front of you and say that Irma was because of climate change," she said. "Some people will say that we've had hurricanes for as long as people can remember. That is true.But remember that Irma was the largest storm in the Atlantic on record."

Yet by making efforts to roll back the destruction of the atmosphere excessive greenhouse gas emissions are known to have caused over the past century, many climate scientists say reversing slowing those emissions could curb the conditions that raise the intensity of the storms while creating a climate that encourages a regular El Nino — even if the natural phenomena of hurricanes are unlikely to disappear.

"We know that heat contributes to storm formation," Hopson-Fernandes said. "We know that heat also encourages storm formation and rapid intensification.”

Amsterdam University intends to return HCC's hospitality by inviting students and teachers to their campus in November.

Language:
English

Source URL: https://news.hccfl.edu/news/hcc-news-students-amsterdam-hcc-talk-warming-waters-hurricanes-time-when-everyone-should

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