

# Why kindness in science matters

## Women's Climate Conversations online 2021

#7 on Tuesday September 14, 2021

### *Climate science, women and kindness – Connecting the dots*

Review and reflection by WCC member, Honey Nelson

Our regular Women's Climate Conversation series feature conversations with guests around our core principles of women's leadership and commitment to a political culture of collaboration, where care of all Life and the Earth are at the centre of governmental policy-making for a remedial path to climate safety: and finding an innovative path for equitable and sustainable changes into the future (see the Congress's [Vision and Values statement](#)).

For the September event our guest conversationalists were [Assoc Prof Melissa Hart](#) and [Dr Angela Maharaj](#), climate scientists and educators, and two of the rising numbers of women in positions as leaders and spokespeople for their disciplines across all branches of STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine). Dr Maharaj is the second woman to become president of the Australian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society and is the first person of colour to occupy that position. This gives them (thankfully!) a podium from which they can affect the language and attitudes of discourse in these disciplines. Both seek to ameliorate the rather uncollaborative manners of traditional science and information-sharing, in favour of cooperative procedures, which notably mark the teamwork approach of women in science.

This online conversation was convened and hosted by Women's Climate Congress founding members, Barbara Baikie and Dr Janet Salisbury. After acknowledging country, Barabra Baikie opened the meeting with two quotations:

'A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees'

*Amelia Earhart*

'Kindness in words creates confidence;  
Kindness in thinking creates profoundness;  
Kindness in giving creates love.' *Lao Tsu*

Setting the topic of *Climate Science, Women and Kindness* in context, Janet Salisbury reflected that this series of 2021 Climate Conversations has often revealed people's deep-seated confusion, depression, even despair in facing our future of climate heating.

But some sustained messages have shone through:

- that the heart-qualities of compassion, love, empathy, forgiveness are the source of strength, not weakness; that we can open our sphere of compassion beyond its traditional boundary of community, to encompass life on the whole Earth
- that our despair can be turned to 'active hope' by service to our community under threat
- that we can find true direction and strength for the ordeal of reconstruction, through recognising the First Law of the First People: that all life is born by the loving Land, and our most primary reciprocal love and duty of care is to the Mother Earth and all her Life.

There are serious divisions in world attitudes to the climate crisis. Some people still reject the 'remote' reports of science on global warming, in favour of emotive misinformation through social media and denial movements. Probably the distant, objective language of climate science commentary contributes to this public 'credibility' problem: and thereby aids the confounding of truth with nonsense opinion.

Both guests underscored the extremity of the global threat: the IPCC ‘code red’ warning of momentous events ahead. From this perspective the speakers’ descriptions of the crossfires within their disciplines was unsettling. Climate scientists *know* how disastrous it will become: far more than the general public’s fuzzy view of discomforts yet to be seriously felt. The scientists live within a world of truth; but it is subject to intense competition, hierarchical struggles, and the ever-decreasing chance of an academic toehold by younger graduates. Meanwhile, the more compassionate feelings and language often characteristic of women are not generally reflected in a male-determined culture of science. As Melissa put it: ‘hunger games’ preside in science.

This has generated an ‘unkind’ culture of refusing acknowledgements of contributions, of counting success only in relation to numbers of published papers, of minimising collaborations, side-lining teaching, and limiting interaction with governments, industry, and NGOs. These factors maintain the institution of ‘Science’ as a bastion distanced from exchange with diverse world citizens. As Angela observed: Few of the most senior scientists are women, fewer still are people of colour (see for example this [article in \*The Guardian\*, April 2021](#)).

Leadership is a central issue: there is a tendency for senior staff to ‘overstay their welcome’, often without admitting the views of younger people, nor the views and values of communities, teachers and citizens. However, the present crises of viral pandemic and global heating – planetary challenges – all bring an urgent need for attentive listening, swift and brave leadership and group responses.

Yet there are emerging instances of cultural change. Melissa told of the ‘[Kindness in Science](#)’ movement, an initiative started by women scientists in New Zealand, which set out to counter this unkind culture – actively promoting diversity, sharing, respect, openness and inclusion. This new movement has now been taken up in Australia, and Melissa has offered a number of workshops to scientists in her institution. Melissa and Angela agreed that these ideas are bringing discernibly better outcomes in scientific endeavour. They also noted that with over 3000 scientists engaged internationally, the IPCC is a good example of the benefits of working as a team, as well as of greater diversity and sharing of credit.

Melissa described her experience in 2018 on the ‘[Homeward Bound](#)’ women in STEMM leadership program. Under the tagline ‘Mother Nature needs her daughters’, this program has been running since 2016 with about 100 women scientists completing the program each year (which pre-COVID included residential intensive training on board an Antarctic voyage). Melissa told how on reflection she realised that the program enacted the kindness in science ideals, and in doing so has evolved a close international network of women in various fields of science and technologies who support each other through various ongoing interaction and mentoring.

In conclusion our conversation turned to the need for kindness across other disciplines, including those that impact decision making and policy development – including ‘kindness in politics’, ‘kindness in economics’. And, if we are to survive, we need to privilege kindness not only in science itself but also to creatures, to life, and to the biodiversity of the whole Earth.

Go to the [Women’s Climate Conversations](#) webpage for more information, and to watch the videos of this conversations and others in the series.



L-R: Dr Angela Maharaj and Associate Professor Melissa Hart