Leading marine researcher says scientists must speak, reach out and integrate into society

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A photo of Jane Lubchenco is available at the end of this story.
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CORVALLIS, Ore. – Under siege in the “post-truth” era, researchers must fight back by demonstrating the value of science and making it accessible to the public, including engaging citizens in projects that produce useful knowledge, an Oregon State University marine ecologist said today in a published commentary.

“Access to information, and critical thinking, are essential for an informed democracy,” says Jane Lubchenco, a distinguished university professor in the OSU College of Science and advisor in marine studies for the university. “A post-truth world, a US cabinet full of climate deniers, suppression of science and scientists all threaten – seriously threaten – our democracy. Resistance is appropriate, but now, more than ever, scientists also need to engage meaningfully with society to address intertwined environmental and societal problems.”

Lubchenco, an internationally recognized expert on marine ecology, environmental science and climate change, is urging researchers to act boldly and creatively to counteract a “pervasive” dismissal of facts exemplified by President Trump’s labeling of climate change as a hoax.

She outlines three parallel approaches for scientists to “rise to the occasion, find solutions and help create a better world”:

1) Demonstrate the merits of science by making it accessible, which includes eschewing jargon in favor of plain language and acting in such a way that shows scientists are warm, caring human beings;
2) Provide hope by highlighting successes, creating even more successes, and figuring out how to bring them to a meaningful scale;
3) Modify academic reward structures to incentivize public engagement as a core responsibility.


With facts losing ground to appeals to emotion and personal belief in the shaping of public opinion, Lubchenco sounds a clarion call for the scientific community to do everything in its power to stand up for science and also to make research findings understandable, credible, relevant and accessible.

That includes, Lubchenco says, “getting off our lofty perches and being more integrated into society.”

“Fortunately, many politicians and other citizens still believe that decisions based on science are better decisions than those not based on science,” says Lubchenco, past president of the Ecological Society of America.
The challenges of the post-truth era demand that scientists serve in a way that responds to needs through interactions with citizens based on humility, transparency and respect, she says.

“Now’s the time for all scientists to take a quantum leap into greater relevance by helping people to understand how important our work really is,” Lubchenco says. “For example, the world has finally begun to make tangible progress in addressing climate change. We can’t let a post-truth mentality derail that or the other things we do to improve people’s lives.”

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Editor’s note: A photo of Jane Lubchenco is available at https://flic.kr/p/n95cV4.

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