TURNING POINT
Saffron O'Neill

Saffron O'Neill, who studies the interactions between society, policy and climate change at the University of Melbourne in Australia, won the 2011 UK Scopus Young Researcher Award for the Social Sciences on 22 November.

What drew you to study climate change?
I see it as the most pressing environmental issue of our time, and there are lots of policy questions. After my undergraduate degree, my mentors advised me to go to the Tyndall Centre for Climate Research at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK. The centre was offering a PhD scholarship to determine how people engage with climate-change information.

Was that meant to be in the social sciences?
It was open-ended, but the abstract focused on the physical sciences — modelling climate in ways that are amenable to public understanding. However, investigating why people didn't engage with this information was more interesting, so my PhD was turned on its head. That was a turning point, realizing that I could contribute from a social-sciences perspective.

How did the 'Climategate' release of e-mails from researchers at the University of East Anglia affect your work?
Climategate happened in November 2009, five months after I left. My former colleagues were in the news all the time. I had moved to the University of Melbourne as a postdoc, but I still received hate mail, including death threats. The experience made me realize that scientists are keen to communicate with the public, but need to do a better job of explaining how scientific discoveries get made.

Why did you decide to go to Australia?
One reason was so I could gain experience in a different country. It was challenging to learn about an unfamiliar policy arena, but it was rewarding to see how Australia and small island states are addressing policy challenges. And I had been working on climate-change mitigation, but had a growing interest in adaptation. My adviser here, Jon Barnett, is an international leader in this area. He focuses on how small island states will have to adapt. I also got a four-year postdoc, which gave me a lot of stability. I didn't have to scrabble around for short-term contracts.

What can your research do to advance climate-change policy-making?
The public has a lot of the scientific information needed to start making decisions, yet isn't doing so effectively. Decision-making is the most important social dimension of any environmental problem, and that is where the most interesting questions lie. My research shows that people embrace climate-change information most if it is relevant to places they care about — for example, how sea-level rise may affect London — or if they can empathize with the affected animals, such as polar bears.

What activities helped to raise your profile?
I served on a panel to assess whether an Australian preparedness strategy, known as Stay or Go, actually put people at increased risk during bush fires in the state of Victoria in 2009, which killed 173 people. Other countries mandate evacuation. The commission reviewing the policy drew on our panel's report when making its final recommendations. It was a rare opportunity to show how science — analysing the forensic data, statements, texts and phone calls made during the bush fires — can help to improve disaster-preparedness policies. I think that experience may have counted in my favour for the Scopus award, which takes citations into account.

What is your next step?
I have a full-time lectureship on public perceptions of climate change lined up at the University of Exeter, UK, which is building a team of climate-change researchers. I've enjoyed being in Australia, but didn't realize how isolated it would feel here. Simply collaborating or going to meetings is really hard. A 24-hour plane ride to Europe is a big deal. Plus I'm trying not to fly too much, being a climate-change scientist. ■

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN

EUROPEAN UNION

Call for more mobility

A group of universities has made recommendations on how to draw researchers to the European Union (EU). Among other things, the League of European Research Universities (LERU), based in Leuven, Belgium, has called for more transparency about visa regulations that affect researcher mobility, more incentives for companies to give venture funding to scientists and measures to promote gender equality in research. The group published the suggestions on 14 December, in response to a call by the European Commission (EC) for input on its proposal for a European Research Area Framework, to improve the European research environment and help to coordinate funding across the EU, set to be established by 2014. Katrien Maes, LERU's chief policy officer, expects to hear a response from the EC by spring 2012.

COLLABORATION

US–Russian pact

The US National Science Foundation (NSF) has inked an agreement with the Russian ministry of education and science to encourage collaborative research in areas such as energy, nanotechnology and information technology. Early-career scientists applying for NSF grants could improve their chances by collaborating with Russian researchers, suggests John Tsapogas, programme coordinator for the NSF's Office of International Science and Engineering in Arlington, Virginia. The agreement, co-signed on 16 December, allows the Russian ministry to fund US–Russian projects. Tsapogas says that the ministry has a larger budget than other Russian science agencies, so it has a high likelihood of collaborations.

CANCER RESEARCH

New York fellowships

The Memorial-Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York is creating ten five-year, early-career research fellowships. They will be funded with US$15 million from $50 million donated to the centre by the Robertson Foundation in New York. Fellows will get tenure-track appointments, says Charles Sawyers, chair of human oncology and pathogenesis at Sloan-Kettering. Investigators will be recruited in oncology and pathogenesis, cancer biology and genetics, pharmacology, and immunology. Sawyers expects much of the research to be translational.