

Colin Polsky,

Ph.D., Director, Florida Atlantic University Center for Environmental Studies

In the battle against climate change, knowledge is perhaps the greatest tool that environmentalists wield. Dr. Colin Polsky, director of the Center for Environmental Studies at Florida Atlantic University, with a long background as a climate social scientist, is on the front lines of that struggle.

He studies “how people perceive, create and respond to climate challenges such as sea level rise,” and he’s working to educate South Florida on the challenges it faces while helping to bring the region to the forefront of a new “Resilience” industry—with the sole purpose of fighting the adverse effects of climate change.

On what South Floridians should know about climate change:

“Number one is that climate change and sea level rise are real, today. Number two is that we expect the pace to pick up rapidly in the coming decades. Number three is that this matters in South Florida, because we’re at such a low elevation. In other places, like New York City for instance, you go inland a little bit and you rise in elevation a lot. Here, you go inland, and it’s still flat.

All of these things are troublesome. South Florida is arguably the first test worldwide for whether or not a population will successfully adapt to this challenge. There’ll be a number of other places worldwide that will be facing this soon, but we’re the first ones out of the gate.”

On local recognition of the issues:

“There is an increasing awareness here that something is going on, but the details are a surprise to people. Even the question of whether or not the ocean goes up and down over time by itself, over Earth history, [can be] surprising.

Southeast Florida is really the leading edge of the spear, and because of that, the partisan nature of this issue here is melting away ... [and there is] a higher level of awareness here than in most places, which makes sense because the water is in the streets.”

On how climate change is impacting hurricane strength and frequency:

“We know that the oceans will be

warmer, which gives greater fuel to storms. And so whatever number of hurricanes we observe in any given year, they’re likely to be, on average, stronger and wetter because the oceans are warmer and the atmosphere is warmer.”

On what gives him hope:

“There are some bright spots, and that’s why I find this field so interesting and exciting. I moved here because if any place has a fighting chance at succeeding at this experiment, which has never been undertaken before, it’s here. And by here, I mean the four counties, Monroe, Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach, because they banded together. Because of their intercounty agreement—the Southeast Florida Regional Climate Change Compact—there’s been a tremendous synergy of science and engineering and policy work for the last 10 years.

A lot of people who live here love it here... Some neighborhoods will look different in 20 years than they do today as a matter of necessity—because they’re just too wet to be livable. But I think there’s enough love for this place, and the economy is strong enough, that we’ll be able to reorganize and still make it work. There’s still a good fighting shot at that. And that’s what keeps me going each day.”

On the future for South Florida in the battle against climate change:

“One interesting silver lining is that

as a result of all of these challenges and pressures, and the energy being invested to meet the challenges, we have the emergence of a new industry.

We’re calling it resilience—coastal

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resilience or climate resilience—and it’s basically a synthesis of engineering and planning and business and architecture.

What it requires is a mindset around change, and growth, and equity in the face of increasingly wet conditions. This industry is going to be a high value-added industry, and it’s something that should arguably and rightfully have its home worldwide right here in Southeast Florida. Much like the global financial industry has Wall Street, and tech has Silicon Valley, and automotive is in Detroit, the resilience industry is being born and it should really be focused here, in a place that’s growing its own talent.

And then that can be a knowledge-based economy that we can export. Because other cities worldwide are going to be facing the same set of falling dominoes that we are.

We’re just up to bat first.”**b**



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