UN Climate Conference in Warsaw; action or denial?

By Keith Peterman

The UN climate conference opened today in Warsaw, Poland. Officially called the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) 19th Conference of Parties or “COP 19”, the overarching goal of the annual conference is to forge international agreements that will stabilize “greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous [human] interference with the climate system.”

Unfortunately, many of those at the negotiating table value current-day pocket money at the expense of guaranteeing a habitable world for future generations. Throughout the conference, Climate Action Network (CAN) will present Fossil of The Day Awards to the countries who are the worst obstructionists. First on stage this year for the infamous award was Australia. Australia announced at the beginning of the conference that it will not put forth any new finance commitments at Warsaw. Cabinet ministers characterized climate finance as “socialism masquerading as environmentalism.” CAN countered, “We have news for you. It’s not socialism. It’s equity and it’s your responsibility.

Australia appears to be in denial of its ethical responsibility. We are all watching news reports of the devastating weather event that just ravaged Australia’s neighbor to the north, the Philippine islands. Super-Typhoon Haiyan may be the strongest storm ever to hit land. In 2012, The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its special report on extreme weather. The conclusion—we can anticipate more extreme weather events due to climate change and there will be significant costs in managing these risks. Australia cannot hide its ethical responsibility behind a mask masquerading as conservative fiscal responsibility.

We—the US—likely can expect to receive quite a few Fossil Awards of our own in the coming days. Our chief climate negotiator Todd Stern announced prior to the conference that any final agreement at COP 19 needs to be flexible, with “pledges rooted in domestic ambition.” Domestic Ambition! Consider the anticipated level of our “domestic ambition” with so
many head-in-the-sand, anti-science, climate-change-denier US legislators. President Obama promised in his 2013 State of the Union speech to address climate change “for the sake of our children and our future” and he followed this up with a strong Climate Action Plan. Unfortunately, a Presidential goal does not translate into action with a resistant legislature.

Youth will inherit the negative outcome of current day inaction. They get it! Under sponsorship of the American Chemical Society, two teams of youth will be attending respectively week-one and week-two of COP 19. They will be using social media to reach out to their college and university peers back home. Their purpose is to promote climate science literacy in the hope that it will spur civil society—You—into action. If you would like to get a youth-eye-view from the epicenter of international climate negotiations, check out their blog and their other social media outreach—Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.