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Rafe Pomerance, the Paul Revere of Climate Change, Dies at 79

An environmental lobbyist and activist, he was a pivotal figure in drawing public attention and political support to the existential issue.

By Trip Gabriel
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Rafe Pomerance, an environmentalist who discovered in an obscure 1979 report that burning coal heats the atmosphere, which roused him to play a Paul Revere-like role in warning the public and politicians about climate change, died on Thursday in Washington. He was 79.

The cause of death, in a hospital, was lung cancer, his stepson, Benjamin Cooley, said.

An activist known on Capitol Hill and in executive branch agencies, but almost nowhere else, Mr. Pomerance emerged as the central figure in a whole-issue article in The New York Times Magazine in 2018, “Losing Earth” by Nathaniel Rich.

The article, later expanded in a book and now in production as a movie, portrayed the decade from 1979 to 1989 as a lost opportunity, when climate change first became a national issue. Both Republican and Democratic leaders pledged to avert disaster — before the window was slammed shut by the administration of President George H.W. Bush, under the sway of the fossil fuel industries.

“I think he’s the central figure in the emergence of climate change as a political issue,” Mr. Rich said of Mr. Pomerance in an interview. “He was really the man behind the scenes all through, and he understood at a very early stage intuitively that he shouldn’t himself be the messenger.”

That is because Mr. Pomerance, although he possessed a charismatic personality — “voluble, energetic and obsessive” as Mr. Rich described him — was neither a scientist nor a lawyer.

He was a lobbyist, working in the 1970s and early 80s for the environmental group Friends of the Earth. In 1979, he read an Environmental Protection Agency report that, almost as an aside, stated that coal emissions could warm the planet to a “significant and damaging” degree.

“I was shocked. I said to myself, ‘This can’t happen!’” Mr. Pomerance recalled in a 2019 interview with Dædalus, the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He showed the report to a colleague and told her, “This must be the whole banana.”

That carbon dioxide released from burning coal and petroleum could heat Earth’s atmosphere had been theorized since 1896. Scientists had measured increasing concentrations of carbon in the atmosphere since the early 1960s, and some had written scholarly papers with dire warnings about a future of melting ice sheets, rising seas, calamitous weather and imperiled species.

Their alarms had not cracked the awareness of the public, politicians, the news media or even environmental groups, which focused on discrete issues like smog or toxic waste dumps.

Mr. Pomerance organized the first briefings by a climate scientist for government officials, in 1979, accompanying Gordon J.F. MacDonald, a prominent geophysicist, to meetings with members of the Carter administration. “They had never heard of climate change,” Mr. Pomerance recalled in the 2019 interview. “We started at zero.”

He also cultivated allies in the media and Washington-based environmental groups.

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Another climate scientist Mr. Pomerance introduced to policymakers, James Hansen of NASA’s Goddard Institute in New York, became the most prominent messenger of the impending threat. Mr. Pomerance saw that Dr. Hansen, an Iowa native, had a knack for translating complex atmospheric science into plain English.

“It was really Rafe from the beginning who understood James Hansen would be someone who’d be a trusted authority,” Mr. Rich said.

Dr. Hansen, who developed computer models to project climate change, became a frequent witness at hearings led by Senator Al Gore of Tennessee and Senator Tim Wirth of Colorado, both Democrats.

Mr. Pomerance was the central figure in a New York Times Magazine article that became the book “Losing Earth,” about missed opportunities to combat climate change.

In June 1988, during a year of record global heat, Dr. Hansen testified to a Senate panel that global warming was no longer theoretical; it could be detected “with 99 percent confidence” and “is changing our climate now.”

His testimony was front-page news across the country, including in The Times under the headline “Global Warming Has Begun, Expert Tells Senate.”

In that presidential election year, climate change was a bipartisan issue. Mr. Bush, who was then the vice president but running for commander in chief, pledged to fight the greenhouse effect with “the White House effect.” His conservative running mate, Senator Dan Quayle of Indiana, declared, “The greenhouse effect is an important environmental issue.”

Mr. Pomerance, who had moved from the Friends of the Earth to the World Resources Institute, another environmental group, turned publicity into policy. He proposed that nations reduce carbon emissions by 20 percent. It was a hard target, which found its way into the keynote speech by Mr. Wirth at an international climate conference in Toronto in late June 1988, as well as in the agreement adopted by politicians from 46 nations.

Once in office, Mr. Bush appointed some climate advocates, notably the E.P.A. chief, William K. Reilly. But opponents of taking action, including John H. Sununu, the White House chief of staff, who rejected climate science and warned of damage to the economy if limits were put on fossil fuel use, won the day. The administration’s delegates to the first meeting of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in 1989 in the Netherlands, opposed cuts or even a freeze on global emissions.

Mr. Pomerance attended that conference with no official role. Three decades later, he told Dædalus that it was a lost opportunity.

“We worked toward getting governments to commit to hitting certain emission targets over certain time scales,” he said. “That would have been the beginning of a major step toward a solution. We still don’t have that commitment in the United States.”

Rafe Pomerance was born on July 19, 1946, in New York City, one of three children of Josephine (Wertheim) Pomerance and Ralph Pomerance. His father was

an architect whose works included the Swedish Pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair. His mother was an antinuclear activist who campaigned in favor of arms control.

Mr. Pomerance was a grandson of Maurice Wertheim, a merchant banker in New York, and a great-grandson of Henry Morgenthau Sr., who served as President Woodrow Wilson's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire.

He grew up in Cos Cob, Conn., playing ice hockey on a frozen lake on the family property, and received a bachelor's degree in history from Cornell University in 1968. He joined protests against the Vietnam War and was later granted conscientious objector status.

His activism extended to the environment when he founded the National Clean Air Coalition in 1973, which pushed for antipollution laws, including amendments to the Clean Air Act in 1977. He joined Friends of the Earth in 1975 and served as president from 1980 to 1984. From 1986 to 1993, he was senior associate for climate change and ozone depletion at the World Resources Institute.

During the Clinton administration, beginning in 1993, Mr. Pomerance was deputy assistant secretary of state for environment and development. He was a negotiator of the Kyoto Protocol adopted in 1997, which commits nations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The United States did not ratify the treaty.

Mr. Pomerance married Lenore Markwett, a psychotherapist, in 1975. Besides his wife and stepson Ben, from a prior marriage of Ms. Markwett's, he is survived by two other children, Lilah and Ethan Pomerance; a brother, Stephen Pomerance; a sister, Pamela Steiner; and seven grandchildren.

Mr. Pomerance remained active on climate issues in later years with the group Arctic 21, a network raising awareness about the climate threat to the poles.

He was well aware that in the more than 40 years since he began sounding alarms, the Earth had continued on a perilous warming path, and international agreements had lacked mandates to slow rising emissions.

He recognized that an enormous amount of warming was already baked in to the atmosphere, and he became a proponent of geoengineering — technological efforts to suck carbon from the air, which is controversial among environmentalists.

“Shouldn’t I be totally depressed?” he asked in 2019, adding, “Yet I’m not.”

One reason was how many people had come to understood the climate crisis.

“When I started, nobody had heard of the problem. Nobody was active,” he said. “We started at zero. Well, look at us now. Everybody in the world knows about climate change. So is that progress? Let’s hope.”

https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/24/science/rafe-pomerance-dead.html