

THE
ECONOMIC
CLUB OF
CHICAGO

The Club had the privilege of hosting environmental activist and photographer James Balog for two programs on March 2nd: a Young Leadership Forum Luncheon, and a Forum Dinner later that evening. Mr. Balog is the founder and director of The Earth Vision Institute and the Extreme Ice Survey, two organizations focused on bridging “the divide between art and science through unique conceptual insights, technological innovation and scientific knowledge,” and ultimately educating global citizens about the impact of environmental change.

The Young Leadership Committee hosted 26 members at The Chicago Club that afternoon, where Mr. Balog answered questions from members and shared his journey from young outdoorsmen to photographer and activist.

Growing up in the suburbs of New York City, Mr. Balog knew from a young age that he did not want remain there. He became invested in mountaineering when he attended Boston College, where he hiked the Presidential Range of the White Mountains in New Hampshire. Having studied geomorphology, Mr. Balog soon realized, “I didn’t want to wind up in computing. I wanted to be outdoors.” He then transitioned to nature photography, admitting he had no guidance or experience whatsoever. Even so, his photography ended up gracing the pages of *Time* and *Life* magazines, eventually leading him to *National Geographic*.

Young Leader Committee Chair Toni Irving delved into a question concerning the environment and American exceptionalism as a possible explanation for the country’s lack of action.

“We have understanding of how this is going on. We have scientific understanding,” said Mr. Balog. “Unfortunately, we as a society and species are slow to react to such slow moving threat. We react to the sharp, incoming threats.”

Despite that fact, Mr. Balog did have confidence that the 50 years of environmental progress already achieved would continue. Quoting Winston Churchill, he said, “You can always count on Americans to do the right thing, but only after they’ve exhausted every other option.”

The Forum Dinner was held at the Radisson Blu Aqua Hotel Chicago later that evening, where Mr. Balog gave remarks to 300 members and their guests, including many children. The presentation included trailers for Mr. Balog’s upcoming documentary and

a trailer for the award-winning documentary released in 2004, *Chasing Ice*, which chronicled his team's work on the Extreme Ice Survey.

The content of his remarks focused on examining the observable evidence of climate change: increased wildfires and melting glaciers.

"I often have people say to me – do you believe in climate change? And my answer is always no," said Mr. Balog. "I don't *believe* in climate change. I *think* climate change is real based off the evidence that so many thousands of women and men have observed in science and that I've observed in my own reality with photography."

An important and relevant point to make, according to Mr. Balog. As he explained, we live in curious times "where the very notion of science is under attack. That there's an objective reality that people have understood and analyzed and measured for a long time and somehow that might not be real."

This "objective reality" is something witnessed, with evidence springing up around the globe.

In the case of wildfires, 10.5 million acres of additional land have been burned in the last 30 years due to climate change. These wildfires hit close to home for Mr. Balog, who described a wildfire his own community faced in the Colorado Rocky Mountains that overtook his neighbor's home.

When discussing the evidence found from melting glaciers, Mr. Balog used his own photography to tell the story. His time-lapse photos show glaciers that had receded up to three miles over the course of a year due to higher atmospheric temperatures. He used an apt analogy to explain his frustration with societal inaction.

"Very very few people, if faced with lung cancer or a cardiac problem would be willing to go around to 97 doctors who said they had a problem and they needed action on it and keep looking for the three doctors out of 100 who would say 'oh don't worry about that tumor in your lungs, just keep it there.'"

After his presentation, Mr. Balog took part in a moderated question and answer period with Forums Committee Chair Keith Cardoza, with members asking questions that delved into everything from national security implications to near death experiences.

Mr. Cardoza asked how climate change became such a politicized issue, and whether that was unique to the United States.

"Unfortunately [climate change] has become a political football here, and I think that is profoundly, deeply unfortunate," said Mr. Balog. "The paralysis at the national level is sad, criminal, and I fear our children, by the time they're our ages, will be looking back at this era and shaking their heads and just being baffled at how we could have been so slow to react to the clear and present information and danger that's all around us."

Despite the lack of action by the federal government, Mr. Balog gave suggestions of what individuals can do in their day-to-day life:

- LED Lights
- Heat Control (NEST, eGauge)
- Drive a hybrid or electric car
- Bike, walk or use mass transit

For members interested in learning more about what they can do to take action on climate change, please see this [slide](#) from Mr. Balog's presentation, or visit the Extreme Ice Survey [website](#).