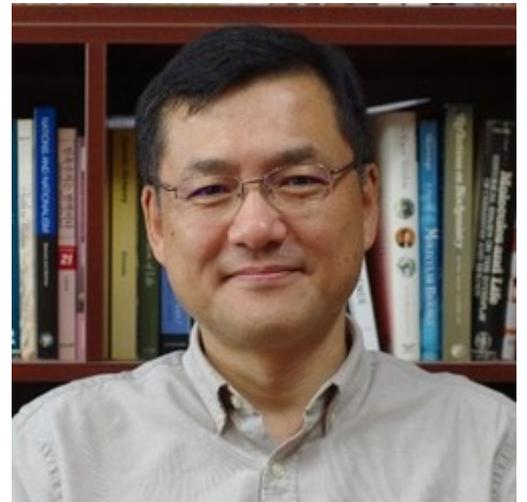


Interview: Welcome to the Anthropocene!

✎ Ada Carpenter Senior Staff Reporter |
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As the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) took place in Glasgow, UK, *The KAIST Herald* looked closer to home for an insight into science and environmental policy for the modern age. We sat down with Professor Buhm Soon Park, the Director of the Center for Anthropocene Studies at KAIST, to learn about its establishment and current research into human effects on our planet.



Professor Buhm Soon Park is the Director of the Center for Anthropocene Studies

Please briefly introduce yourself to our readers.

My name is Buhm Soon Park, [and] I'm teaching History of Science and Science and Technology Policy (STP) in the Graduate School of STP. I came to KAIST in 2007, so it's been 14 exciting years meeting students, teaching, and doing research. In that time, some very important things have happened, including the creation of STP at KAIST in 2008, and recently the creation of the Center for Anthropocene Studies (CAS) in 2018.

My undergraduate study was actually in Chemistry, but I switched departments in graduate school because I wanted to understand the history of science — how it grew and interacted with other disciplines. I then continued to study History of Science in the US, and got my PhD in 1999 on the history of quantum chemistry.

Why and how was the Center for Anthropocene Studies (CAS) established?

[Creating the CAS] was not always our plan, but in around 2017, there was a grant opportunity for the creation of a convergence research center supported by Korea's National Research Foundation. Along with other STP professors, especially Professor Chihyung Jeon, we decided to try it [based on] the concept of the "Anthropocene". It was actually inspired by Prof. Jeon's involvement with the Deutsches Museum while on sabbatical in Munich, Germany. Around that time, they had an exhibition titled "Welcome to the Anthropocene". [We were] eager to do something similar in Korea!

So, we prepared [the idea] and invited professors from many different departments, but we put in the proposal without much confidence, actually. It was so interdisciplinary, and not many of the participants had even heard of the concept of the Anthropocene at the time. Back then, the term was rarely talked about in Korean society, but it has to do with many current issues, like the climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, problems of modernity, disasters — you name it. [It's] sort of an umbrella term that can be used to cover so many important projects. Luckily the proposal was well received, so we started the CAS in the summer of 2018.

The first thing I tried to do [as Director] was find a coherent direction without impinging upon each researcher's autonomy. Actually, although my title is Director, I don't really want to forcefully direct, but at the same time I tried to develop common interests and encourage others to think about certain issues. It wasn't that smooth at first, but as we continue, our common ground is being formed. So it has been a very fruitful experience.

At the moment we have 14 core researchers; seven of them are from science and engineering departments, and the other seven are from humanities and social science. Many of them are from KAIST — we have eight different departments participating — and there are also four other universities and institutes, including a sociologist from Seoul National University, an anthropologist from Jeju University, and a researcher from the Korea Institute of Geoscience and Mineral Resources (KIGAM). As you know, KAIST doesn't have an Earth Science department, so we definitely need somebody who specializes in geology, because the Anthropocene as a term was actually coined by a climate scientist working in earth systems science in around the year 2000.

Could you explain what the term "Anthropocene" means?

The idea [that came] out of the field of earth science was a geological concept — that Earth has entered into a new era, an era that is [incredibly] affected by human social, economic, and military activities. They called it the Anthropocene, which effectively means “human age”. In around 2009, the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) was established by mainly geologists, and then the idea spread into social sciences and even arts — now the idea is exploding! The Anthropocene is closely related with our concerns about the climate crisis, but it is also more than that: not just carbon emissions but also human interference with habitats, and much more. It stretches our imagination about what kind of future we want to live in. And that’s why it generates so much interest in so many disciplines.

So what are the main research focuses of CAS right now?

The Center has three main groups: Sensing, Inhabiting, and Imagining. The Sensing group is about how to find and measure evidence for the anthropocene in Korea, or more broadly [in] East Asia. We try to see the changes going on in different spaces in weather, air, water, and earth. The second group is Inhabiting: how can we live together peacefully on this damaged planet? We need a new kind of governance, and a new understanding of what it means to be human. These are the basic questions the Anthropocene poses — so this group is focused on finding the answers in humanities and social sciences. The third group, Imagining, is more about our future, and how we communicate with the general public through journalism and art.

Our main missions are first, of course, research, second education, and third — perhaps most importantly — public engagement. The Anthropocene is not just an academic field; it [affects all of us], and we need everyone to be involved. We have done work with several art and science museums in Daejeon and Seoul to create [informative] exhibits. Actually, I am going to Busan next week to give a talk at the Museum of Contemporary Art on the same theme.

Do you have any memorable examples of how the interdisciplinary approach has benefited your work at the CAS?

Our first major event took place in 2019 [when] we held an international symposium on Anthropocene studies in Seoul, inviting the major researchers in the field, including three members of the AWG and many others from all over the world. We took the time to visit the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which has become one of our collaborative projects. Out of

that symposium, we decided to write an article for a major scientific journal together, and it is almost finished! Once it's published, I think it will be one of our major research outcomes, so I'm very excited about that. It's not easy to work with 18 people from different fields writing one piece on a common concern, but [we have found a way]. Our working title is "One Planet, Many Voices", and our main argument is that we need a new democracy of voices in the Anthropocene, because it is a different political environment. We have to change our perception and understanding of our relationship with Earth, taking a lesson from indigenous peoples and those who have already been victims of colonialism and disasters due to the Anthropocene. We did that collaborative work mainly through emails, but many [of my colleagues] were experienced in interdisciplinary work, and recognized that work on the Anthropocene cannot be done in one field alone.

How can students get involved with the CAS?

Graduate students can take a course that I have been offering each year called "Survey in Anthropocene Studies". It's a pretty reading-heavy course that introduces students to the main concepts and methodologies of the field, and it's open to students from other departments, not just STP. If students are interested, they are always welcome to come to our almost weekly colloquium sessions (and get a free lunch). You can find out more information on our homepage (anthropocenestudies.com). More substantially, we also need undergraduate students as research assistants, and hire several students during summer or winter breaks. Students who are interested can contact me or other professors for specific projects.

Any closing remarks?

I think, more and more, people are realizing that we are living in a world full of crises in many different dimensions — the pandemic, the climate, social inequality, the potential for war. What's important is that we must not think of these as isolated [events], but as all connected. If the climate crisis continues, resources will become scarcer, and it becomes a political issue, and wars could break out. That's one scenario. Another is that we will lose our biodiversity, and then an unexpected virus spreads, and we have another pandemic. The concept of the Anthropocene is a very good way to see this multidimensional crisis in an integrated way, and I think it will be very useful for years to come.



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