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The Emperor's New Climate: Is Global Warming Real?

Duncan Maxwell Anderson

Monday, Feb. 16, 2004

Everyone knows that the planet Earth is heating up disastrously. Everyone. If you listen to the news at all, you know that the 1990s was the hottest decade in 1,000 years. That Delaware-sized chunks of Antarctica are melting. That the sea will rise and swallow cities like Amsterdam and New Orleans, and that there has been a record number of storms and killer heat waves worldwide. That tropical diseases like malaria, dengue fever, and Ebola are spreading to northern countries because their climates have become so warm.

Scientists know this: The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) just published a petition with 1,000 signatures saying that computer simulations show that mankind is causing a dangerous warming of the planet.

The United Nations (UN) and the U.S. Catholic bishops know it, as do famous actors and actresses. Little schoolchildren have learned it. So have teenage boys who weren't paying attention in class but who read Outside magazine (for young men interested in risky sports and pictures of babes in hiking gear). One of the cover lines on the December 2003 issue reads, "Dude, the Alps are melting!"

Global warming is "a weapon of mass destruction," says Sir John Houghton, the former head of the British Meteorological Office, who also served with other prominent scientists on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a group convened by the UN. American policy and American factories, power plants, and cars are largely to blame, according to UN scientists, because it's disproportionately their exhaust that's putting carbon dioxide (CO₂) into the air, causing the planet to heat up.

Global warming has become part of our culture's common sense. Who among us, whether a tree hugger or a free-market zealot, has not shrugged to himself inwardly as he started his car on a frigid winter evening to go pick up the kids? You pull out of your driveway, waiting for the roaring internal-combustion engine to burn some more dinosaurs and kick the waste heat to the defroster and to the heater at your feet – to make you more comfortable, for now. But where is this heat and exhaust going in the end?

It scarcely seems an exaggeration to say the whole world is going to vaporize like an Oklahoma town zapped by a B-movie spaceship, just from you and me driving to the mall and back. But how is this possible?

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Here's how Jerry Mahlman of the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) explains the "greenhouse effect" – by which, he says, the planet's temperature will probably rise 6 to 8 degrees Fahrenheit this century, and on to even more catastrophic levels thereafter for the next 1,000 years: The sun shines, sending us energy. Some of the energy, mostly in the form of high-frequency waves of visible light, passes through the layer of gases we call our atmosphere and hits the earth. As it does, it changes from visible light into the lower-frequency, invisible waves we call infrared energy – or heat. That's what's going on when the sun shines on a rock and the rock becomes hot to the touch.

Heat is then radiated from the earth back toward space. But because the frequency of infrared waves is lower, they can't pass as easily through the earth's layer of atmospheric gases – including CO2, methane, nitrous oxide, and water vapor – and are trapped.

The heat stays trapped for a time, heating up the atmosphere and the earth below it like a greenhouse warming in the winter sun. The heat-trapping gases are called "greenhouse gases." The greenhouse effect isn't all bad, though.

"The earth can only sustain life because it is wearing a light blanket of greenhouse gases," Mahlman says. "Without them, the planet would be 65 degrees [Fahrenheit] colder" – which is to say it would be an ice ball.

But Mahlman says we've been making the planet warmer and warmer by adding to the layer of greenhouse gases: Every time we burn something, whether we're driving a car, generating electricity in a power plant that runs on coal or oil, or staring dreamily into the fireplace on a winter evening, we're adding greenhouse gases to the atmosphere (especially CO2), which are formed when burning substances in the fuel combine with gases in the air.

The more we burn, the more gases are released into the atmosphere and added to the earth's insulating layer.

The effect, Mahlman says, is that "each year, the blanket gets a little thicker," less heat escapes into space, and the world gets warmer.

That's the theory of global warming in a nutshell.

"Only a fool," Mahlman warns me, "would argue against this."

Earth in the Lurch

Global warming first became big news as a doomsday scenario about 15 years ago – just as the Soviet bloc was about to collapse. A joint session of Congress held hearings on global warming as a possible threat to life on earth. The environmentalist lobby Friends of the Earth (FOE) arranged for a NASA scientist named James Hansen to testify. Officially, Hansen would be speaking as a private citizen to avoid having his testimony edited by his employers, the (first) Bush White House.

Hansen was originally invited to address Congress in November 1987 but protested to FOE that in the cold of autumn, his remarks wouldn't get



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much attention. Instead, the following summer, on June 23, 1988, during a drought, with the temperature at 101 degrees Fahrenheit in Washington, D.C., Hansen spoke. He testified that according to computer simulations he and other scientists had been developing, the hot weather was no mere summer heat wave but a sign of much worse to come.

There is "a strong cause-and-effect relationship," he said, "between the current climate and human alteration of the atmosphere." Impatient with the scientific etiquette of probability and uncertainty, Hansen told reporters afterward, "It's time to stop waffling so much, and [to] say that the greenhouse effect is here and affecting our climate now."

Hansen's remarks made a sensation in the media, and Hansen himself was lionized by Senator Al Gore in the Senate and later in Gore's best-selling book, *Earth in the Balance*. By 1990 President George H. W. Bush and the Senate cooperated to begin spending more than \$1 billion per year to fund scientists at universities and institutes to study global warming.

The sense of crisis about the world's climate hasn't abated. The threat of global warming is the heavy breathing behind every weather report. Do you feel a bit guilty when you read that this has been an unusually hot June, a surprisingly mild winter, or a shockingly warm Thursday? I do.

Since the UN's global warming panel – the IPCC – was formed in 1987, it has issued three scientific assessment reports, which have all relied heavily on computer modeling. You start with an idea of how the earth's climate works, plug in the prevailing winds, so much rainfall, so much sunlight, so many tons of greenhouse gases ... and you try to predict: If CO2 production goes up 1 percent per year, what will the earth's temperature be in 2050?

Think how many times you hesitate – given the accuracy of weather reports – over whether to bring an umbrella to work, and you have some idea of how hard it might be to project what the average global temperature will be 50 years from now. Nevertheless, the summary of each IPCC report got a little bolder, saying in the Third Assessment in 2001, "There is new and stronger evidence that most of the warming observed over the last 50 years is attributable to human activities."

It also contained something much sexier: a chart of global temperatures from 1000 a.d. to the present, with the early years' temperatures deduced from the fossil record. The researcher was David Mann of the University of Virginia.

His chart showed the global temperature bumping along steadily since 1000 – and then shooting up in the 20th century like the handle of a hockey stick, with the highest recorded temperature occurring in the most recent year, 2000. Beyond that, the line projects the temperature to continue rising even more steeply in future years to reach what appears to be the boiling point of stone.

The IPCC's Sir John Houghton was photographed for the press in front of the chart. It was possibly the high point of the global warming cause.

[The National Climatic Data Center \(NCDC\) in Asheville, North Carolina,](#)



uses weather stations, satellites, ocean buoys, weather balloons, and more to measure the atmosphere and its weather from sea level up to the stratosphere. When I called, I reached the chief of the Climate Monitoring Branch, a quiet, steady-sounding man named Jay Larrimore.

I asked Larrimore if the average temperature had risen dramatically in America during the 20th century.

"From 1910 to 1945, there was a pretty rapid increase," he said. "From 1945 to 1975, the temperature was pretty flat. Then from 1975 to 2000, it went up again."

"So," I asked, "what would you say was the total warming for the century?"

"There's not much disagreement that temperatures have gone up about 1 degree Fahrenheit over the past century."

"That's funny, I thought you just said '1 degree.'"

"One degree is about right."

"One degree? We're spending \$2 billion a year and drawing hockey sticks for 1 degree?"

I continued. "So ... what has a ... 1-degree global warming meant for mankind? Are there more droughts, more heat waves, like we've been told? You know – 'the greenhouse effect is here.'"

"We haven't seen much of a change in the frequency of droughts," Larrimore replied. "Some models predict it more than others. And we don't have the data to say heat waves have increased."

"You don't?"

"There are certainly problems with the model runs. That's why they're continually working with them. Our job over here is just to collect the data."

"So, what has happened with a 1-degree warming?"

"Fewer frost days, less snow cover, more precipitation, a rise in minimum temperatures rather than maximum temperatures. ..." Most of the warming, Larrimore tells me, has occurred in the coldest places on earth – such as Siberia and Western Canada.



If global warming is real, then why am I so cold? I live just outside New York. It's 19 degrees Fahrenheit this morning – again. That's 5 degrees below the normal minimum for this date. My son is three weeks old as I write this, and he has already lived through two major snowstorms, one of which set an all-time record for the most inches (16) at the earliest date (December 5).

And winter hadn't even started yet.



Duncan Maxwell Anderson writes on science, religion, and politics when he is not splitting firewood to heat his house in upstate New York.

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