

ENVR E-130 / DHPP-347

# **Global Climate Change: The Science, Social Impact and Diplomacy of a World Environmental Crisis**

<http://courses.dce.harvard.edu/~envre130/>

## **State of Play in the Evolving Debates**

**Professors William Moomaw and Timothy C. Weiskel**

**Harvard University Extension School**

**Spring Semester - Session 4**

**19 February 2008**



# So, for the Second Hour...

“Scientific Knowledge, Public Understanding and the Changing Tone of Public Exchange”

There is an unprecedented amount of climate information being introduced and the tone of public exchange has changed markedly in the last year.

- But while the articulation of the science has become more robust and louder in the public sphere many in the public remain honestly confused.
- *Why is this?* In the country that has the greatest coverage of news and public affairs, with constant 24/7 access to the latest information and where the scientific community is finding a new “voice,”

why is there still so much public confusion?



# Greater clarity from Science Community

The science has become increasingly clear just *in the past two months*, since this course began.

Consider, for example, some of the most recent statements of the:

1. IPCC Working Group 1 - 4<sup>th</sup> Assessment Scientific Summary for Policymakers – hard hitting journalism
2. The AAAS (annual “town hall” in San Francisco)
3. The Scientific Expert Group, UNF-Sigma Xi Report
4. Science “teach-ins” like that from the New York Academy of Sciences/ 2030 Initiative. (James Hansen, et. al.)



# However, there are 5 principal reasons for continued confusion....

- 1) The "rejectionism" of the "denialists" -- Senator Inhofe (numerous confusions and a continuous battery of embarrassingly ill-informed speeches and media interviews). See, especially: 25 September 2006 Jerry Falwell, Jake Jacoby (Boston Globe), hate radio, etc.
- 2) The Lomborg diversions and distractions ("*yes, global warming is happening, but it is by far not a priority -- poverty is the priority*");
- 3) The Michael Crichton's insidious implication that climate concern as fear-mongering driven by eco-terrorists.
- 4) The long-standing and explicit attempt of the current administration to falsify, slant, spin and misrepresent government scientific data; (See Seth Shulman; Rick Piltz, UCS, DN)  
and
- 5) the well financed public relations "positioning" of climate issues by petro-corporations and the coal industry. ("think tanks", Gelbspan's investigations, AEI and Frank Luntz ).



# All of this is taking place while...

- The terms of debate are shifting: G. Monbiot.
- In addition, the oil/automotive industries are trying desperately to keep business going “as usual” –with “hybrid cars,” CO2 ads etc.  
and
- The election year and the poll-driven electoral cycle guarantees that no significant public leadership will emerge in what has become a “continuous election year...”  
Moreover...



If the public is confused can they turn to the news media for clarification?

In short, can the news media help?

No, not as they are currently constituted. In fact, there is a crisis in the American news media. “News” has collapsed into a form of entertainment. In effect the broadcast news media (now owned lock-stock-and- barrel by the entertainment industry) has completely failed to perform its historical role in a democracy – that of informing the public about the circumstance before it and the decisions that need to be taken in the interests of its security and survival. See: What's Happening to the News, Frontline, 27 February 2007. (See also Part 1 and Part 2).



# What is being minimized ignored and overlooked?

In addition to anthropogenic carbon contributions to the atmosphere several aspects of the science of climate change are being unduly minimized or ignored altogether in the public mind... These include:

- The link between extreme weather and climate change is not well understood;
- The question of “tipping points” is not adequately discussed;
- The role of variation in solar radiation is not emphasized;
- The role of marine clathrates as well as the tundra methane and their potential for rapid “outgasing;”
- The variation in ocean thermal currents;
- The impact of volcanism on climate variation; and

Moreover the interaction of these phenomena is being lost from view because of the increased polarization of public discussion.



The result is a magnified sense of human power and importance in the ecosystem...

Consider Al Gore's recent formulation of the issue:

"Al Gore on the Message of *An Inconvenient Truth*,"  
PBS - NOW, (26 January 2007).

Do we really "have everything we need" as Gore states?  
Is "political will" all that is needed, as he suggests?

*If care is not taken, this assumption could lead to another form of the "arrogance of humanism."*

In formulating climate policy a crucial question remains:

**Are humans as powerful as we like to think?** If not, how should we behave to improve the chances of species survival in a delicately balanced and rapidly evolving ecosystem of which we are only a part?



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