

Global warming will save millions of lives

Dire predictions about climate change and health omit the cost of cold, says Bjorn Lomborg.

By Bjorn Lomborg.

Last Updated: 11:19AM GMT 13 Mar 2009

Global warming will increase the burden on the British health system because more people will suffer from heat-caused illness. This was the message delivered to a conference in Copenhagen this week by Alistair Hunt, a researcher at Bath University. "I am trying to bring home the impact of climate change to everyone," he said.

There is one significant impact that the researcher did not "bring home" in interviews about his work: warmer temperatures will save lives.

It is true, as Hunt noted, that the 2003 heatwave claimed 2,000 lives in Britain; that human-caused warming will increase global temperatures by about 2.6 degrees Celsius on average; and that high temperatures cause heat strokes, heart attacks and other illnesses, which hit the elderly and chronically ill the hardest. But low temperatures also kill. The old, infirm, homeless and very young are at the highest risk of hypothermia, heart attacks, strokes and illnesses caused or exacerbated by the cold.

Winter regularly takes many more lives than any heatwave: 25,000 to 50,000 people each year die in Britain from excess cold. Across Europe, there are six times more cold-related deaths than heat-related deaths. We know this from the world's biggest cross-national, peer-reviewed studies under the aegis of Professor William Keatinge of the University of London.

Global warming will mean more frequent heatwaves, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – by 2100, every three years instead of every 20 years. But bitterly cold spells will decrease as quickly, coming once every two decades, rather than every three years.

For the UK, the Keatinge studies show heat-related deaths caused by global warming will increase by 2,000. But cold-related deaths will decrease by 20,000. The only global study suggests that this is true internationally: by 2050, there will be almost 400,000 more heat-related deaths a year, and almost 1.8 million fewer cold-related deaths. Warmer temperatures will save 1.4 million lives each year. The number of saved lives will outweigh the increase in heat-related deaths until at least 2200.

This is not an argument to do nothing in the face of global warming. But focusing only on the negative lays the groundwork for extremely poor policies.

Hunt's research was presented at a Copenhagen summit that had key speakers with views more negative than consensus expectations, in the hope of convincing politicians to commit to drastic carbon cuts.

This is the wrong response: even if the Kyoto Protocol's promised carbon emission reductions had been fully implemented across this century, temperatures would only be reduced by an insignificant 0.2°C, at a cost of \$180 billion a year.

If we want to cut temperatures faster – and identify new technology that can cool houses in summer and save lives – we need cheap alternative energy technology within 20 to 40 years. If every country committed to spending 0.05 per cent of GDP on researching non-carbon-emitting energy technologies, that would cost \$25 billion a year, and it would do a lot more than massive carbon cuts to fight warming and save lives.

To prepare adequately for the challenge of global warming, we must acknowledge both the good and the bad that it will bring. If our starting point is to prove that Armageddon is on its way, we will not consider all of the evidence, and will not identify the smartest policy choices.

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