

Climate Science or Climate Evangelism?

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COPENHAGEN – As George W. Bush and Tony Blair learned the hard way, the public does not take kindly to being misled about the nature of potential threats. The after-the-fact revelation that the reasons for invading Iraq were vastly exaggerated – and in some cases completely fabricated – produced an angry backlash that helped toss the Republicans out of power in the United States in 2008 and may do the same to Britain's Labour Party later this year.

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A similar shift in global public opinion is occurring with respect to climate change. The process picked up momentum late last year, after hackers leaked thousands of e-mails from a top British research facility showing that some of the world's most influential climatologists had been trying to disguise flaws in their work, blocking scrutiny, and plotting together to enforce what amounts to a party line on climate change. More recently, the United Nations' respected advisory group, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), has been deeply embarrassed by the revelation that some alarming predictions contained in an influential report that it released in 2007 have little or no scientific basis.

Although none of these lapses provides any reason to doubt that global warming is real, is man-made, and will create problems for us, these challenges to the IPCC are taking their toll. Indeed, recent surveys show that the public is growing steadily less trusting of the scientific consensus on global warming.

The biggest headlines about IPCC errors concern a claim about melting Himalayan glaciers that it made in its 2007 report on the likely impacts of climate change. "Glaciers in the Himalaya are receding faster than in any other part of the world," the report noted, adding that "if the present rate continues, the likelihood of them disappearing by the year 2035 and perhaps sooner is very high." As it happens, this prediction was not based on any peer-reviewed scientific research but was lifted from a report by the World Wildlife Fund, which was repeating an unproven speculation by a single researcher.

This lack of scientific basis did not stop countless global-warming activists from citing the glacier prediction at every opportunity. When the Indian government suggested last year that the Himalayan glaciers were in better shape than the IPCC claimed, the IPCC's chairman, Rajendra Pachauri, dismissed India's objections as being based on "voodoo science."

Earlier this month, the Indian government reacted to the revelations about the baseless nature of the glacier claim by announcing plans to establish what amounts to its own "Indian IPCC" to assess the impact of global warming. India's environment minister, Jairam Ramesh, declared: "There is a fine line between climate science and climate evangelism. I am for climate science."

Climate evangelism is an apt description of what the IPCC has been up to, for it has exaggerated some of the ramifications of climate change in order to make politicians take note. Murari Lal, the coordinating lead author of the section of the IPCC report that contained the Himalayan error, admitted that he and his colleagues knew that the dramatic glacier prediction was not based on any peer-reviewed science. Nonetheless, he explained, "we thought that if we can highlight it, it will impact policy-makers and politicians and encourage them to take some concrete action."

The concrete action that they had in mind was getting governments to mandate drastic cuts in carbon-dioxide emissions. Activists have been pursuing this approach to tackling global warming without success for nearly 20 years, most recently at last December's failed climate summit in Copenhagen. The problem is that it is too expensive a solution for politicians and the public to swallow easily – which is why many well-meaning climate scientists have apparently concluded that instead of relying on reasoned discussion, they might as well try to scare us witless.

Consider what the IPCC had to say about extreme weather events such as intense hurricanes. The cost of such events in terms of destroyed property and economic disruption has been rising steadily. Every peer-reviewed study has shown that this is not because of rising temperatures, but because more people live in harm's way.

Nonetheless, in the IPCC's influential 2007 assessment of climate change, the panel's Working Group II (charged with assessing the potential impact of global warming) chose to cite one, then-unpublished study that supposedly found that global warming had doubled damage costs over the past 35 years. In fact, when this study was finally published, it stated categorically that there was "insufficient evidence" to link the increased losses to global warming. In other words, what Working Group II reported was plain wrong.

Elsewhere in the 2007 assessment, Working Group II claimed that "up to 40% of the Amazonian forests" were at imminent risk of being destroyed by global warming. The basis for this claim was a single report from the World Wildlife Fund that itself cited only one study, which didn't even look at climate change, but rather at the impact of human activities like logging and burning. In similar fashion, Working Group II claimed that "by 2020, in some [African] countries, yields from rain-fed agriculture could be reduced by up to 50%." Much quoted since, this alarming statistic turns out to have been based on a single, unreferenced bullet-point from a report by an environmental think tank.

There are numerous other examples of similar shenanigans by Working Group II. Yet, aside from a grudging admission that its predictions about Himalayan glaciers were "poorly substantiated," the IPCC has yet to acknowledge – much less apologize for – any of the lapses.

If the IPCC is to do to its job properly, it must own up to all of its missteps and clean house. Nobody expects it to be infallible. But neither should we tolerate its attempts to scare policy-makers rather than inform them.

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