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# FROM THE STATE GEOLOGIST

## Facts, Myths, and Media Misrepresentations

by John P. Bluemle



Reports on global climate change (almost invariably referred to as “global warming”) fill our TV screens, news magazines, and newspapers. *Time* magazine’s April 2001 issue carried a 16-page special report on global warming (it pictured a frying Earth on the cover). A front-page headline in *USA Today* stated “*Global Warming is Real and Not Going Away.*” The *New York Times* stated, in a recent headline, that “*Global Warming is Getting Worse.*” Despite extensive coverage like this, much of the information relating to global climate change is left unreported, and much of what is reported is grossly inaccurate.

Consider, for example, the cooling trend in the lower five miles of the atmosphere, detected by weather balloons and independently confirmed by NASA’s orbiting satellites. These satellite data, gathered from all over the globe through precise microwave and radio measurements, show an average drop of 0.19°F in air temperature since 1979. The National Academy of Sciences has stated that this cooling trend, which conflicts with the global warming hypothesis, is “*so pronounced as to be difficult to explain.*”

Most media reports ignore any evidence for cooling, preferring to focus on records from land stations, which indicate a one-degree Fahrenheit increase in surface temperatures during the past 100 years. They fail to report that this increase was measured mainly in and around urban centers. It indicates urban – not global – warming. The heat absorption and reflectance properties of an area change as concrete, asphalt, and steel replace fields, forests, and meadows. As a result, urban areas generate and retain more heat than do rural areas.

The fact that 90 percent of this urban warming occurred before 1940 is seldom, if ever, mentioned. If carbon dioxide emissions from factories and cars were causing warming, most of the increase in temperature should have occurred after 1940, when industries and cars became much more plentiful, causing carbon emissions to increase significantly.

Also left unreported is the fact that, from 1946 until 1975, a time during which industrialization expanded and

carbon-dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere increased tremendously, urban surface temperatures actually cooled. During that time, many in the media feared a new Ice Age. Millions of dollars were pumped into government and university research programs to study the problems of global cooling. Remember? In fact, I made my own small contribution by writing an article on “global cooling” for this newsletter in 1978. I noted the possibility that “global chilling” could lead to a new Ice Age (I concluded that it was likely to happen sometime within the next several thousand years – I apologize if such speculation fueled the hysteria. *Mea culpa*).

The *New York Times* recently stated, unequivocally: “*Human activity is the dominant force behind global warming.*” Even assuming global warming is taking place, is it necessarily due to human causes?

Any competent reporter actively searching for facts about climate change, would quickly learn that, during the last three years, more than 17,000 American scientists, including geologists, geophysicists, climatologists, meteorologists, and oceanographers, have signed the Oregon Petition, which states that “*there is no convincing scientific evidence that human release of carbon dioxide, methane, or other greenhouse gases is causing or will, in the foreseeable future, cause catastrophic heating of the Earth’s atmosphere and disruption of the Earth’s climate*” (<http://www.oism.org/pproject/s33p37.htm>).

Such omissions on the part of reporters – whether due to incompetence or deliberate attempts to mislead – amount to unconscionable and irresponsible attempts to scare people. CNN warns of “*disastrous weather changes*” resulting in “*more floods, droughts, storms and hurricanes.*” *Scientific American* magazine has forecast “*death by drowning or starvation*” and the “*emergence, resurgence and spread of infectious disease.*” Never mind that, through recorded history, periods of cold climate, such as the Little Ice Age in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, have been times of pestilence, and plague. The more benign times of relatively warmer climate have been times of prosperity and enlightenment.

Among the many scientists who think that the catastrophic scenarios are mistaken is Frederick Seitz, former president of the National Academy of Sciences. He has gone a step further and stated his belief that a warming of the Earth would be beneficial to mankind and to life in general. Warmer weather extends growing seasons and generally improves

the habitability of colder regions.

Given all the contrary evidence and scientific dissent, why is so much reporting biased toward the belief in a disastrous, human-caused global warming? It seems to me that many people have accepted the premise that civilized humans – by exploiting nature to fulfill their needs – are not the creator, but the destroyer of human values. They hold this non-objective doctrine with blind fervor. Their dogmatic, totally unscientific stance, somewhat reminiscent of the Inquisition, leaves no room for evidence to the contrary.

The view that humans are inherently destructive leads people to automatically distrust everything that humans create. Newspaper and television reporters are not scientists. Sometimes it is hard for them to evaluate scientific studies in an objection fashion. Even so, the solution is not to accept every extreme claim – and then report it as though it is as credible as information available from more reliable and credible sources. Much of what is reported belies a confusion between “*being objective*” and creating an arbitrary “*balance*” between “*the two sides*.”

Objectivity is about facts. Medical science can be objective about the facts about a disease without being neutral, as between the bacteria and the patient. Medical researchers’

objectivity about the facts is what enables them to discover how to save a patient’s life and kill the bacteria. My own and other’s geologic studies have shown that Devils Lake has risen and fallen repeatedly during its 10,000-year history. Scientific objectivity allows me to say that the lake is currently rising, just as it has in the past. This is not necessarily a “good” or a “bad” thing. It is just a fact. The job of science is to hypothesize possible answers and solutions to problems, then prove or disprove those hypotheses. Developing a theology or dogma (e.g. “wetlands drainage by farmers is what is causing Devils Lake to rise”) to support a hypothesis is inherently unscientific.

Acceptance of the non-objective extremist approach is why many reporters unquestioningly report that factories, power plants, and cars are causing a catastrophic global warming. And it is why, 30 years ago, so many in the media unquestioningly reported that factories, power plants, and cars were causing a catastrophic global cooling.

If you want to know the truth about global climate change – or acid rain, or the ozone hole, or any other high-profile environmental issue – you need to keep in mind that much of what you read and hear is not objective. The media are reporting on the world as they see it: filtered through green-colored glasses.