



Is There a "Scientific Consensus" on Global Warming?

by David Hogberg

"Climate experts agree..."

"Clearly, one of society's biggest problems will be how to survive..."

After reading the title of this BRIEF, one would reasonably assume that the above two quotes are taken from a recent article on global warming. Actually, they come from a more than twenty year-old episode of the TV program "In Search Of" hosted by Leonard Nimoy. The topic of that show? The coming "ice age."

At one time "experts" supposedly agreed that an ice age was upon us. Now the media has propagated the fiction that there exists a scientific consensus on global warming.¹ This fiction derives from two sources. The first occurred in 1988, when James Hansen, director of NASA's Goddard Institute of Space Studies, claimed, based on the best scientific evidence available, he was "99 percent sure...the [human caused] greenhouse effect has been detected and it is changing our climate now." His congressional testimony was widely covered by the media and left the impression that scientists were "in lock-step" that global warming was happening.²

The second source of this fiction was the United Nations' (UN) 1990 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The UN pronounced that this panel represented a scientific consensus on global warming. However, this supposed "consensus" collapsed almost immediately after the media reported it. And as the 1990s wore on, the picture of the scientific community on the issue of global warming was not one of harmony but of heated debate.³

There is considerable disagreement in the scientific community over the historical record of the earth's temperature. The record used by the IPCC, known as the Historical Climate Network, is composed of temperature readings from hundreds of rural weather stations. This record shows a definite upward trend in surface temperature over the twentieth century. On the other hand, satellite data compiled by climatologist John Christy shows no such trend. Nor does data provided by readings from weather balloons.⁴ The discrepancy in these various climate records demonstrates that the scientific community is divided over the question of whether the planet is in fact heating up.

Even if global warming is occurring, scientists are also divided over how much the planet is likely to heat up. Early climate models cited by the IPCC predicted that the earth would heat up 7.6 degrees Celsius (13.6 degrees Fahrenheit) by 2050. Yet those models were based on very shaky predictions about the greenhouse effect. The greenhouse effect occurs when water vapor and carbon dioxide prevent heat from the Earth's surface from going into space. Humans supposedly increase the amount of carbon dioxide by burning fossil fuels, thereby increasing the greenhouse effect. The 1990 IPCC models were based on the assumption that the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would double in the next century. However, recent data shows that levels of carbon dioxide are not rising as much as predicted in early models.⁵ As a result, the IPCC has revised its models so that the earth's temperature rises no more than 3.5 °C (6.3 °F) by 2100. In addition, a Government Accounting Office model predicts a rise of only 1.25 °C (2.3 °F) degrees by 2100.⁶ One wonders if future improvements in climate data will result in an almost negligible increase in the earth's temperature.

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Finally, there is also disagreement in the scientific community over what, exactly, might be causing global warming. There is reason to doubt that human burning of fossil fuels is responsible. The Rothamstead Experimental Station in England possesses one of the most complete temperature records in the world that dates back to 1878. Employing this record, Arizona State Climatologist Robert Balling discovered that over 90% of the warming in the twentieth century occurred before 1950.⁷ In short, this means that most of the warming in this century occurred *before* the vast majority of carbon dioxide emissions caused by the burning of fossil fuels.

There is little consensus in the scientific community over global warming. There exists considerable disagreement over whether the cause of global warming is human based, over how much we can expect temperatures to increase, and even over whether global warming is actually occurring. The Kyoto Protocol is the measure supported by liberal environmentalists to impede supposed global warming. If implemented, the Kyoto Protocol would be extremely harmful to the U.S. economy. Before we undertake such drastic policy measures, the scientific community must be in much greater agreement over two matters. First, they must be in agreement that global warming will in fact have dire consequences for the environment, a subject examined in the next BRIEF. Second, scientists must be near certain that global warming is indeed a real phenomenon, far more certain than they were about the coming ice age.

ENDNOTES:

1. Richard S. Lindzen, "Global Warming: The Origin and Nature of the Alleged Scientific Consensus," Regulation: The Cato Review of Business and Government, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1992, found at <http://www.cato.org/pubs/regulation/reg15n2g.html>.
2. H. Sterling Burnett, "The Collapsing Scientific Cornerstones of Global Warming Theory," Brief Analysis from National Center for Policy Analysis, June 30, 1999, No. 299.
3. Geoff Metcalf, "Is 'Global Warming' Hot Air? Geoff Metcalf Interviews Renowned Atmospheric Scientist, Dr. S. Fred Singer," WorldNetDaily, May 7, 2000, found at http://www.worldnetdaily.com/bluesky.../20000507_xngme_is_global_shtm.
4. Patrick J. Michaels, "Hot Air for the Millennium," Vol. 3, No. 3, Environment and Climate News, (Chicago, IL: Heartland Institute, March 2000), p. 5. Also see Patrick J. Michaels, "Global Warming Smokescreen," Vol. 3, No. 5, Environment and Climate News, (Chicago, IL: Heartland Institute, May 2000), p. 6.
5. Patrick J. Michaels, "Computer Models, the Kyoto Protocol, and Reality...Making Sense of Nonsense," Vol. 3, No. 3, Environment and Climate News, (Chicago, IL: The Heartland Institute, March 2000), p. 6.
6. H. Sterling Burnett, "The Collapsing Scientific Cornerstones of Global Warming Theory," Brief Analysis from National Center for Policy Analysis, June 30, 1999, No. 299.
7. "A Complete Temperature Record," Vol. 3, No. 14, Cooler Heads, (Washington, D.C.: Competitive Enterprise Institute, July 7, 1999), p. 3.

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