

as judged by your Piers

Rising tide of fact sinking climate sceptics

“Nah, I don’t believe in global warming. For example, take the 10-year old Eucalypt in my garden. It was killed by last winter’s frost. If Global Warming exists, why didn’t it happen before?”

I have heard versions of this argument depressingly often. It contains four basic misconceptions, but may lead to some psychological insights. The first error is to assume that one’s own amateur observations are valid data points, comparable to the measurements of a specialist. The unfortunate eucalypt could have died as a result of air-ponding caused by the neighbour’s new garage, for heaven’s sake.

The second is to assume that local events can be extrapolated to the whole world. Furthermore, Global Circulation Models suggest that there will be entire regions larger than New Zealand where the short-term consequences will be a cooler climate.

The third difficulty is another confusion of scale. Why do people find it so hard to appreciate the importance of a relevant timescale? (One person told me that Global Warming was no cause for concern: after all, the Earth had been molten rock four billion years ago!) One cannot expect a continuous smooth trend. Ten years is too short an interval on which to judge or react to human-induced Climate Change, and for that matter a thousand years is far too long. The IPCC has focussed on 100 years as being a more appropriate human timeframe.

Fourthly, a popular but erroneous opinion is that the whole theory of global warming was derived from temperature observations. In fact, international concern arose because of the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide that had been observed since 1957 - plus the well-known behaviour of that gas. The International Framework Convention on Climate Change was formulated by the start of the 1990s, although warming became statistically significant only after another decade. Temperature measurements are merely the validation of the theory, not its justification.

I am aware of at least six members of the Institute of Forestry who are Climate Sceptics and who will probably read this column. These are intelligent, knowledgeable people and on most subjects I have the deepest respect for their wisdom; that some of them feel at liberty to go public with trite, badly researched opinions on a matter of such prominence makes me wonder. Is it possible that in this instance, like so many others, facts are not critical to a person’s belief? Even scientists don’t necessarily start their journey with a blank mind, evaluate the facts, and then painstakingly develop a point of view. No, like everybody else they work with intuition and gut-feeling. The mark of a good scientist is not the absence of intuition, but the speed with which he or she can accommodate superior evidence and change an opinion as a result.

My six forestry friends will hate me for this, but I can’t help comparing them with the Flat Earth Society or the Young-Earth Creationists. I can remember an intense debate on (British) TV. The Flat Earthers were articulate and rational, and their arguments followed a certain logic: “If the Earth were round, New Zealanders would fall off!” I also encountered the analogy-dependent and ignorant ravings of the Creation Scientists (“If you stumbled across a watch, you wouldn’t expect it to have evolved by blind chance, you would immediately assume it had been deliberately designed as a functioning timepiece”). Well, sorry, but the Earth is a sphere billions of years old and biological evolution definitely occurred on it. And humans are capable of, and indeed have started, changing the climate.

So what motivates all these contrarians, if it’s not contradictory evidence? One common factor could be ordinary conservatism and the continuing need to defend previously expressed views. People seek some consistency in their own attitudes and don’t want to acknowledge past misjudgements.

With global warming, there is a perfectly understandable, but deceptive human reaction to something that it so frightening that it just cannot be believed. (“My husband has been killed in a car crash? I don’t believe it; I was talking to him only an hour ago!”) If you accept even a low-range IPCC forecast, the consequences are horrendous. There would be no point in long-term planning for our major coastal cities and we would have to prepare for international economic turbulence and a flood of environmental refugees, among other disasters. It is psychologically easier merely to dismiss the evidence. And possible or proposed measures to counteract the problem seem almost as scary, and are definitely more immediate: increased fuel costs, restrictions on livestock farming, reduced tourism, a boycott of our goods based on “food miles” or “wood miles”, and deforestation liabilities.

But the attitudes of the six foresters can possibly be explained more simply: the desire to buck a trend. Scientists, in particular, have frequently sought notoriety by being dissenting voices. When the mindless rabble chooses one path, almost instinctively they will opt for the other. Or perhaps they believe the simplistic equation: scepticism equals non-gullibility equals wisdom? I think of them as being the reincarnation of eels - with an ingrained desire to navigate upstream against the current, slipping past every obstacle.

Pity this issue is too serious to indulge such normally harmless eccentricities. The names of all climate sceptics should be engraved on a flagstone in Cathedral Square, Christchurch, so that future generations can snorkel down and marvel... .

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