

The following is reprinted with permission of the author who, on 28 July when sending the copy of this article, wrote: "Yesterday John T. Houghton, Britain's most eminent climate scientist, called Tony Blair a coward for not standing up to G. Bush on climate change. He called global warming a 'weapon of mass destruction.'"

## **Global Warming Can't Be Edited Away**

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In June, 2003, the Bush administration took a detailed report on global warming from the Environmental Protection Agency and reduced it to one noncommittal paragraph. As the administration was editing global warming away, however, the World Meteorological Organization (W.M.O.) warned that warming was helping to provoke extreme weather world-wide.

A report by this organization, which is not usually notable for hyperbole, noted that within one month (May, 2003), 1,400 people in India died in temperatures as high as 120 degrees F. Bangladesh was hit by extensive and deadly floods, and the United States experienced a record number of 562 tornadoes (the previous record was 399, during 1992). Much of southern Europe also experienced its hottest June in recorded history -- so hot that many tourists never left their air-conditioned hotels.

The W.M.O., based in Geneva, gathers weather observations from 185 countries. According to Michael McCarthy, writing on the [7/3/03] front page of the *London Independent*, the W.M.O declared that "Events this year in Europe, America and Asia are so remarkable that the world needs to be made aware of it immediately. . . . New record extreme events occur every year somewhere in the globe, but in recent years the number of such extremes have been increasing."

According to the W.M.O., global average land and sea-surface temperatures during May of 2003 were the second highest for that month since systematic global records began in 1880. Considering land temperatures alone, May, 2003 was the warmest on record. The 10 hottest years in the 143-year-old global temperature record all have all occurred since 1990, with the three hottest being 1998, 2002 and 2001, in that order.

Global warming is not simply a matter of tacking on a few extra degrees and breaking a sweat a little more often. "Recent scientific assessments indicate that, as the global temperatures continue to warm due to climate change, the number and intensity of extreme events might increase," the W.M.O. report said.

Rising temperatures make the hydrological cycle, which governs precipitation patterns, much more unstable. This increasing instability already is producing patterns of "drought or deluge." In Nebraska, for example, an area about 100 miles southwest of Omaha, noted until recently for a prolonged drought, on one night in June experienced 12 to 15 inches of rain, half the area's usual yearly total. The storm also brought a tornado that ravaged the same area for half an hour, and dropped hail the size of volleyballs, by volume the largest hail in U.S. history.

The same day that the W.M.O. issued its warning, a noted Harvard medical scientist, Paul R. Epstein, linked global warming to growing numbers of wildfires in the western

United States. "The rise of U.S. wildfires is turning global warming into a real and direct threat for American adults and children," said Dr. Epstein, of Harvard University Medical School. "With continued warming and drying out of land surfaces, we can expect wildfires to worsen."

Epstein and William Schlesinger, a Duke University global warming expert, described a simple link between warmer weather and increased risk of wildfires, such as blazes during 2002 that razed more than 7.3 million acres in the United States. Similar fires of record size scorched Australia during intense heat and drought a few months later. Global warming increases the number of wildfires in already arid areas by making summer droughts more common, as winter snowfall declines.

At the same time, Britain's Office of Science and Technology was warning that English coastal residents face a 30-fold increase in flood damage by the end of the century, due to rising seas and increasingly violent winter storms aggravated, in part, by global warming. Flooding risks that the British Isles faced once in a century late in the twentieth century would rise to once every three years by 2080, according to the same report.

Present-day problems are only early indications of what is to come. Most casual observers have not faced the fact that gradual warming in our time probably will accelerate in decades to come. The oceans, for example, host millions of tons of solid methane (a greenhouse gas) in solid form that will turn to gas and enter the atmosphere as water temperatures rise. Scientists have a cute name for this phenomenon: the "methane burp hypothesis."

We as a species will face and solve this problem because by the middle of this century the penalties of doing too little or nothing will become painfully obvious. The only problem with waiting is that correction will be more protracted and painful. The actual effects on our warming Earth trail our fossil fuel emissions by about 40 years. Thus, we are now facing the climatic consequences of fossil-fuel use during the early 1960s, which were much lower than today.

Global warming also is something of a sneaky phenomenon. Not only does it take decades to become fully obvious, but its greatest effects occur on winter-time nights -- just when many of us could use a few extra degrees for comfort, economic savings, or sheer convenience. Who likes shoveling snow and chipping ice, after all? Under such conditions, few casual observers notice that the warming is part of an accelerating pattern that will worsen generation by generation.

Given this feedback delay, humankind by late in the twenty-first century will face roughly two hot, miserable generations before the fruits of corrective action even begin to show. During those two generations, everyone will become convinced that global warming is the issue *du jour*. Doing nothing to transform our energy base from fossil fuels to renewable forms (such as solar, hydrogen, and wind power) is a very important issue. It becomes more critical with each passing day.

For the time being, we have the luxury of debate. As the White House fiddles, however, the Earth burns.

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