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Nine Billion People. One Planet.



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Back to Basics on Climate and Energy

By ANDREW C. REVKIN



It's time to get back to basics (as in the North Carolina State University chemistry class from the 1920's pictured above).

Once in a while I try to “review the bidding,” as my former editor Cornelia Dean liked to say when some big breaking story was threatening to overwhelm the newsroom. In this case, it's not breaking news but a flood of allegations and attacks on 100 years of research pointing to a growing human influence on the earth's climate. The assaults have been fueled by a batch of liberated/hacked/stolen climate files that, at their root, have yet to be shown to indicate much beyond ill-advised language and strong passions among some climate scientists and by several missteps after two decades of grueling work by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

I'm not saying there's direct cause and effect, but it's almost as if the tidal wave of dire pronouncements about the imminent unraveling of the earth's climate and ecosystems several years ago hit a shore and rebounded in a way that now threatens to inundate the source. More likely, we're seeing the explosive evolution of the blogosphere as a disruptive force, linked up the chain to talk radio and pundits and creating an echo chamber in which noise can swamp information.

As one metric, simply consider that Watts Up With That, arguably the most popular blog tracked by people rejecting the dominant scientific view of global warming, did not exist when the

climate panel's assessments were rolled out in 2007 yet now, according to its creator, Anthony Watts, has reached 10 million page views.

Not surprisingly, the public's reaction to all the turbulence, as reflected in heaps of surveys here and in Europe, has been to tune out altogether.

This all means it's time to return to the basics, as I did at Dot Earth two years ago in a post called "A Starting Point for Productive Climate Discourse."

This time, let's start with Michael Crichton, whose name has been invoked quite often in the comment strings here and elsewhere by those challenging the science pointing to disruptive human-driven climate change. Plenty of elements of his past arguments questioning scientific orthodoxy deserve a thorough airing. But one thing that people forget about Crichton is that he didn't disagree with the basic science on greenhouse-forced climate change, only with the idea that the sensitivity of the climate system was sufficiently established to justify an urgent response, particularly given other pressing problems, particularly poverty.

Those are very different points to argue. To understand his stance on greenhouse warming, it's worth going back to the Intelligence Squared debate in Manhattan in 2007 on global warming. His views on greenhouse gases and warming can be found in the transcript. Crichton, Richard Lindzen and Britain's Philip Stott did not, in fact, dispute the basic science. In fact the point of contention was not "People Can Warm the Planet." It was "Global Warming Is Not a Crisis."

In my endless quest to start discourse by defining where people *agree*, and build outward from there, I asked a question during that debate. My syntax was somewhat muddled, but fairly comprehensible. Here's an excerpt from the transcript, with a few "uhs" and stray phrases removed:

ANDREW REVKIN: I've been writing about this for a long time, most every aspect of it. So my question is one about the hedging — managing risk came up before — which is not what you think of when you think of crisis and catastrophe. My sense is that there's one thing that everyone has agreed on, at least — except maybe Philip — which is that more greenhouse gases will make the world warmer. Is there anyone other than Philip who disagrees with that?

PHILIP STOTT: I don't disagree with it.

ANDREW REVKIN: ...As a hedging exercise, if it weren't costly to slow the pace, beyond the Jesse Ausubel very slow decarbonization, if we could find a new way that didn't cost a lot, that actually could give energy for those developing countries that crave it, and limit emissions at the same time, would anyone on the pro side [who think global warming is not a crisis] think that it's a bad idea to stop emitting greenhouse gases, if there were a solution?

BRIAN LEHRER: Michael Crichton, you're shaking your head no?

MICHAEL CRICHTON: No, I don't think anybody objects. The question is whether or not you're going to spend what Bjorn Lomborg thinks, which is \$558

trillion, and I think, if in fact it's going to prove to be that kind of enormous construction project, then that should not be the first priority right this minute. But no, I don't.

Just in case anyone is confused about my own sense of the global warming problem after watching the science unfold for nearly 25 years, below you can find a list of points that I find are hard to refute. I'll add to them in coming days. (Also review the points in the 2008 post.) **I encourage you to propose points that you see as the basis for agreement.** *Let's try to keep the resulting conversation particularly civil. There has been too much invective of late, here and elsewhere.*

– A broad body of evidence points to a growing human influence on the climate, much of which remains masked by inherent variability in the system. (This is not about *attribution* of existing changes in climate to human activities, but the simple physics.)

– An unabated rise in concentrations of greenhouse gases boosts *chances* of disruptive shifts in climate and other systems that matter to people and other species.

– For the moment, it's not cheap to move away from the fuels of convenience, coal and oil, that when burned are the main source of human-generated greenhouse gases. It's also not easy to move away from the economic and political norms that make these fuels convenient.

– It's clear that a world heading toward nine billion people seeking decent lives lacks the energy menu to make that a smooth journey, with or without climate concerns.

– The world is not remotely engaged in the energy quest that would be required to refine and demonstrate, at large scale, non-polluting energy sources and systems and make them cheap enough to disseminate in places where energy demand is rising fastest (China, India).

– It's clear that vulnerability to impacts from climate extremes, natural or otherwise, is largely a function of poverty, so fostering economic advancement (and access to any form of relatively clean energy, fossil fuels included) in the world's poorest places is smart climate policy.

– It's clear that rapid population growth in places subject to climate extremes — for instance much of sub-Saharan Africa — is another powerful driver of vulnerability.

What's on your list of points about climate and energy that you think provide a starting point for meaningful discourse?