

PLANTS, ANIMALS AND CLIMATE CHANGE: SOME RUMINATIONS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction

A number of years ago I wrote a couple of pamphlets about the politics of AIDS.¹ At the time there was a vast amount of mis- and disinformation about AIDS, its causes, its methods of transmission, and the risks it posed to individuals being peddled as science and fact. I argued that many scientists, much of the AIDS activist movement, and most of the mainstream media either ignored data that was inconvenient to their analysis or circulated facts that were simply untrue in order to scare people into supporting one political agenda or another. Now that global warming has replaced AIDS as the current threat to the existence of humanity, if not the world, I see similar politicking, suppression of debate, misunderstanding, and manipulation of the scientific data being used to deceive and frighten people.

Such fear-mongering, however, would not be effective unless there was a large group ready and willing to be convinced that, this time and at long last, the sky really is falling. Despite the fact that neither a sudden ice age, genital herpes, acid rain, AIDS, SARS, nor any one of the other disasters we have been warned about in the last 20 years or so has lived up to the hype, lots of people are worrying that this time the experts and news media are right.

While, admittedly, all the information is not yet in, it appears to me that this faith in the authorities may again be misplaced. And at least part of the problem is that so many accept a view of how the world is and should be that is based on well-meaning, but inaccurate, ideas about ecosystems and how they function.

The fragile environment

A recurring theme in news media coverage of environmental issues in general, and climate change in particular, is that the world is a delicate place that does not handle change very well. Whatever the specific situation, wherever the ecosystem being written about is located, one can practically be assured of reading or hearing that the environment being discussed is fragile and in need of protection, usually provided by the government. But if the world were truly as sensitive as all that, it would have long since ceased to be.

Life has been around on the earth for eons. And the planet has, at various times, contained all sorts of ecosystems and bioregions, has been through ice ages and hot periods, and has seen thousands of species come and go. But through it all life persists and plants, animals, and microorganisms of one sort or another always figure out how to struggle through.

Despite the clear evidence that the world is, in fact, a quite durable and resilient place that is constantly in a state of transformation, people have become convinced that any change in the environment is, almost by definition, a bad thing. This comes as no surprise since experts and journalists generally describe such phenomena in very negative ways. Climate or environmental trends and events, and scientific studies analyzing them, are regularly described as alarming or disturbing, prodding the reader or listener to respond with despair, and when something untoward or unusual occurs in the natural world, the assumption is made that the worst possible outcome will ensue. Further, while so many happenings in nature are portrayed as awful in and of themselves, their evil is compounded in the minds of many writers and readers by the fact that humans have usually contributed to them.

This picture of a planet in the process of being wrecked by humanity is not the only way to portray the state of the world, and reflects a misunderstanding of how ecosystems work. As natural systems evolve and change, some species benefit and others suffer. That is the nature of any ecosystem. And these changes are unpredictable. While it is sometimes possible to identify trends, people cannot foretell how specific occurrences will influence future climatic and other environmental conditions with any degree of certainty. Besides the inherent unreliability of models created with less than perfect data, one catastrophic event, like a major volcanic eruption, could drastically and quickly change both local and global environmental conditions, mucking up all the scenarios that have been put forth. Predicting events over the next century, especially when the record of accurately forecasting the next day's weather is so unimpressive, is a risky business.

While it is clear that climates in most parts of the world are warming at present and that gases generated by human activities are playing at least some part in

this warming, it is not at all certain what will happen in either the near or distant future. Given that climate systems are complex phenomena influenced by atmospheric temperature, cyclical changes in ocean temperatures and currents, solar activity, etc., it is entirely possible that those who are predicting worst case scenarios by 2100 will be proven wrong. While I make no pretense of being a climate scientist, I believe in questioning authority, in scientific as well as social matters, and believe skepticism is as appropriate in the case of the claims of climate experts as it is in that of politicians, especially in light of the fact that so many of those claiming that the sky is falling look to government action as the way to shore it back up.

Since at least part of the reason people are so willing to accept the media's version of global warming is that they have accepted so many other conventional, but incorrect, ideas about the world around them and the supposed dangers it holds for them, I will address some of these misconceptions about the environment in general before dealing with global warming directly.

Plus ça change

As noted above, change is a part of all natural systems. Ecologists use the term succession to describe this phenomenon. Over time organisms within a certain ecosystem are replaced with other organisms, which over time are replaced by still others. And on, and on. These changes are driven by all sorts of mechanisms: migrations of animals, dispersion of seeds from new plants by these animals, climate change, and other factors. And humans, as a part of nature, are not infrequently involved in causing or hastening such changes.

But in looking at the world around them, people sometimes forget this. They tend to see the condition of the environment at a certain snapshot in time as the way that that environment, local or global, should be. And if it has changed or is changing, especially for reasons related to human activity, then people need to take steps to conserve, restore, or otherwise manage this ecosystem. Such an approach, however, is less natural than the changes people seek to attenuate. Striving for some sort of ideal natural system is, in fact, unnatural. People, like any other species, affect the world around them in various ways, creating new conditions that are no better or worse, nor more or less authentic, than those which existed before.

On Chirikof Island² in Alaska, for instance, cattle were introduced in the 1880s to be used as food for settlers and whaling crews. Years later, people abandoned the island leaving the cattle there. The animals went feral and are thriving, and appear to constitute a genetically unique breed, with angus, siberian, and other ancestry.

Wildlife managers now want to remove these animals, so they can restore the island to its original state. But even if the cattle are removed, the island will not become what it once was and there is no reason to believe that the animals that replace the cattle will necessarily be descendants of those that were there in 1880. Not to mention the fact that the animals and plants that were there just before the cattle came were different kinds from those that were there hundreds or thousands of years before. Not only is it impossible to truly restore an ecosystem to an earlier state, it is furthermore arbitrary to choose a certain point in time, often the state of nature just before human-induced changes, as the desirable or natural environmental condition for some location or other.

Which is not to say that there are never good reasons to re-evaluate what changes people have made and try to alter them in some way. But that is not because one environment is good and another bad in some absolute sense, but rather because one better suits the needs of people in some way. And I do not mean that we should make such decisions based simply on whether a certain ecosystem can provide food, water, or wealth more efficiently in one state or another. I believe that humans have aesthetic, ethical, and other preferences which are important considerations as well. But people should be frank about this and be open about their motivations instead of using code words like conservation and restoration.

Invasion of the soil-snatchers

When new species are introduced into an area and thrive where they previously haven't, at least in recent times, they are often labeled as invasive. People concerned with such matters claim they will choke out native organisms, damage the environment, and otherwise wreak havoc. Brigades are then organized to go out into places like Denali Park³ and uproot dandelions to protect the fragile environment. But the fact that new species can thrive in different places should dispel the notion that these local environments are in fact fragile at all — on the contrary they have shown themselves to be quite adaptable. It is change that concerns the managers and environmentalists. Is Denali Park with dandelions somehow of less value than Denali Park without them? Perhaps in the eyes of some, and it surely makes sense for those who are concerned to go out and fight the invaders. But this resistance to change is not a defense of natural processes; it is simply an attempt to keep things a certain way to please people.

The defenders of the environmental status quo argue that the new species endanger the older, so-called native, species, and thus frame their actions and advocacy

in terms of defending a form of life that has a stronger claim, in their eyes, to a certain piece of turf than does another. But virtually all the species of plants and animals anywhere on earth at this time were once invaders. After the glaciers receded and uncovered barren ground where Denali Park now is, invasive species moved in, and over thousands of years species interacted and competed until the present environment was created an ecosystem that, like any other is dynamic and would be changing right now whether humans ever set foot there or not. Similarly, the islands of what is now Hawaii rose from the sea millions of years ago and were devoid of land species until they were invaded over time by all sorts of newcomers. None of these species have more of a right to exist there than any other. Every one was invasive in its time, just as humans have been everywhere in the world except for a small area of eastern Africa.

In the eyes of some people, however, the means of transportation that bring a species to a new location are as important as its effects where it lands. Plants like dandelions often move in concert with people, spreading first along roads and highways and then moving out from there. The fact that humans aid in their dispersion weighs heavily against them in the eyes of some defenders of the wild. It is true that some new species have been able to spread more widely and quickly than would otherwise have been possible because of their association with humans, but that does not make their spread any less natural or necessarily any more problematic. Humans are as much a part of nature as any other species and their role in dispersion of new species is no more reprehensible than that of other organisms.

Some new species have been harmful to people in ways more concrete than their interference with human enjoyment of (allegedly) pristine natural environments. Some may cause disease, interfere with agriculture, or mess up the plumbing. In these cases, the arguments for intervention to control the new plants or animals are stronger, but these new species are being controlled for the same reason that some older native species were: because they are harmful or inconvenient to people in some way, not simply because they are different.

Extinction and conservation

In addition to their concern about the presence and movement of undesirable organisms, many people are also distressed by the possible disappearance of other, more likable, organisms. When numbers of certain organisms, generally animals of one sort or another, are in decline, some believe that action should be taken to try and reverse this trend. As a result, governments have taken it upon themselves to be the guardians of

endangered species by using laws such as the federal endangered species act to limit or control human activities in certain areas to protect species whose numbers are in decline. But does such action really reflect an interest in the well-being of other beings or, again, an interest in preserving a state of nature that people find beneficial for themselves in some way?

As with other environmental changes, the extinction of species is a completely natural phenomenon, and the fact that human action may accelerate the process does make it any less so. Ecosystems evolve and change along with the different individuals and species, including *homo sapiens*, within them, and as some types of creatures die out, other will grow in number, and nature will, as always take its course. Again, it is reasonable for people to evaluate these changes to see if they benefit or harm human interests in some way and act accordingly. Pretending, however, that the survival of specific types of animals or plants, in and of itself, matters, regardless of human interests and needs, simply muddies the waters and interferes with clear thinking about ourselves and the world.

The crash in populations of cod off the eastern coast of North America⁴ has had a direct impact on people. Fishers have lost their source of income and others have lost their access to one of their sources of food. In this case, a decline in the numbers of a certain type of animal, caused by overfishing, has clearly and directly harmed, or at least inconvenienced, many people. Restrictions on fishing to allow the fish to recover, although ineffective so far, were implemented in order to mitigate the harm to humans, and not out of concern for the fish themselves.

In the case of Steller sea lions in Alaska,⁵ no one has suffered the same sort of harm from the decline in their numbers. But that has not prevented scientists from spending large amounts of time and money, much of it extorted from taxpayers, studying the change in the numbers of sea lions. Since people's interests are more removed from the sea lions than they are from the New England cod, intervention in this case might be seen as an expression of some sort of altruistic concern for other beings, but it really is a response to a different sort of injury to humans caused by the decrease in sea lion numbers. Some people believe that a larger population of sea lions is part of how the environment in Alaska ought to be, and thus their aesthetic preferences have been offended.

If people were truly concerned about other organisms, it wouldn't matter whether there were lots of representatives of a species or only a few, when decisions are made about whether it is alright to engage in activities that might result in the demise of certain plants and

animals. If other beings have worth and deserve protection, they should merit this protection as individuals, not as representatives of a group. The idea underlying the concern for endangered species appears to be that it is OK to kill, directly or indirectly, creatures that are members of an abundant species, but not those that are part of a scarce species. This should not be surprising in a society where people are obsessed with the group membership of human beings as well, endlessly classifying them on the basis of color, sex, sexual tastes, philosophical beliefs, country of origin, etc, and then making decisions about how to relate to others based on their appearance and the expected characteristics of the groups of which they are a part, instead of dealing with other humans as unique individuals. In a world where people are all too often dealt with based on which classification they are part of, it is to be expected that human interactions with other organisms are also guided by such group-focused considerations.

And just as some value other humans who are members of one or another group more than they do others who aren't, people often show a similar preference in their concern for other creatures. While spotted owls and snail darters may garner some press because their officially endangered status has interfered with one human project or another, the animals that really are the star attractions in conservation circles are what are sometimes called charismatic megafauna.⁶ These are the whales and the moose, the bears and the seal lions, the pandas and the elephants. While these animals are no more essential to the ecosystems in which they live than are any of the other creatures they live around, threats to their existence seem to generate much more human distress. When people write and talk of reductions in the amount of sea ice in the arctic, it is the effects on polar bears and not fish (except where the numbers of fish and their role as food for other creatures ultimately affect the polar bears) that get the headlines. People get outraged about aerial wolf hunting, but seem to accept the mass slaughter of salmon in rivers all over Alaska. Of course there is nothing wrong with this aesthetic preference for one species over another, but we should not fool ourselves. Animals, plants and various micro-organisms from top to bottom of the food chain are important to the natural world, but the big animals more easily function as a symbol of what people believe nature should be, and thus engender much more human concern than the lowly eel. And whether they like to watch them or hunt them or just feel good knowing they are there, all this concern for animals is still really about people.

Again, the fact that people's concern about other creatures and the environment ultimately reflects human interests does not make this concern unimportant or invalid. But I believe it is important for people to view

the world around them honestly and realistically so that they will be able to critically examine what they are being told by the scientists, the reporters, and the politicians, whether the subject is invasive plants, endangered animals, or global warming.

Inferno

Just as so many people are taken in by misinformation about and misinterpretations of other changes in natural systems, people are coming to believe in what they read and hear about global warming without adequately questioning it. It has become so much a part of popular culture that hardly a day goes by without at least one article in the newspaper discussing it in some fashion. Virtually every unusual or extreme weather event or other environmental occurrence is attributed in some way to this phenomenon, from changes in animal and plant populations and distributions, to glacier recession, to shrinkage or position changes of arctic sea ice, to flooding in New England, to cannibalism among polar bears. And it has gotten into the routine public discourse as well. Just a couple of weeks ago, during a discussion about the cool weather here in Anchorage this summer, someone told me It used to be like this all the time before global warming, when it's been in the eighties all the time. (Which is of course not true. Although my home town of Anchorage in Alaska has recently been warmer than it was 30 years ago, 80 degree temperatures are still a rarity.) It would seem that those who believe in global warming have won the hearts and minds of the people.

Since acceptance of the idea of global warming has become so widespread, those who question it are often rejected as cranks by the true believers. But while there may be some who actually believe that the climate is not and has not been changing, most global warming skeptics do not question the basic idea that temperatures have been increasing and may continue to do so for some time. What they reject is the grand theory held by many of those who warn us of the dire consequences of climate change. Just using the term global warming to describe climate change often indicates that the writer or speaker believes in a whole package of ideas about rising temperatures and their results, not just the simple facts that temperatures have been going up in most places on the earth over the last hundred years or so and this trend could extend in the future. Advocates of the global warming thesis often believe that in addition to its responsibility for all the world's current environmental and weather woes, increases in temperatures will accelerate over the next century, large scale melting of the Greenland and Antarctic ice caps will take place, the volume of arctic sea ice will continue to decrease, world sea levels will rise dangerously, tropical storm frequency and intensity

will increase, the Gulf Stream will shut down, Europe will cool dramatically, polar bears will die out, etc. Global warming has become shorthand for impending worldwide catastrophe. It is this doomsday cover story which made the claim that *By Any Measure, Earth Is AT THE TIPPING POINT*, that the skeptics are challenging.

Contra *TIME*,⁷ it is decidedly not true that there is unquestionable evidence for the claims of the global warming theorists and advocates, virtually all of which have been challenged and critiqued by other scientists and statisticians. Questions have been raised about how supporting data have been collected, how those data have then been interpreted and presented, and how they have been used to project future developments in climates and ecosystems around the world.

Skeptics have challenged the validity of the hockey stick graph which has commonly been used to demonstrate the recent unprecedented rise in surface temperatures. It has been noted that methods and locations for collecting temperature data since direct measurement has been possible have changed enough over time that the basic data may be flawed. And the methods of collecting and analyzing proxy temperature data for the periods predating direct measurement leave these data open to interpretation. Computer models that are being relied on to make predictions about warming in coming years have been unable to accurately describe even current conditions, and those that predict larger increases in temperatures are more frequently cited than those that foresee smaller ones. In addition, well established cyclic climate changes including the little ice age and medieval warm period may not have been adequately accounted for in formulating either the hockey stick or future temperature projections. So, while it is true that there are increases in surface temperatures currently taking place, it is not altogether clear either that such changes are unusual in any long term sense, or that the rate of increase will continue or accelerate in the future.

On top of this possibly faulty data on temperature trends, phenomena that are being blamed on increased temperatures may in fact have little to do with them. While Arctic sea ice has been thinning and shrinking in area in recent years, at least some of the changes are attributable to changes in wind conditions, not increased temperatures. And although receding glaciers in Alaska may have convinced Hillary Clinton of the reality of global warming,⁸ these glaciers have been getting smaller for at least 150 years, since long before the current warming trend. Destructive hurricanes like Katrina are being blamed on increased temperatures although the evidence for such a link is scant and disputed by some experts on tropical storms. After all,

Galveston was destroyed by a hurricane long before global warming became the villain in every weather-related disaster; the increased destruction caused by hurricanes in recent years likely has more to do with greater human development in risky areas than changes in storm intensity. And as in the case of the disaster in New Orleans, the destructive forest fires of recent years have as much to do with bureaucratic mismanagement and unwise development choices as they do with temperature change.

But what makes me most suspicious of the global warming consensus is the way that critics are so often dealt with. Those who have questioned this orthodoxy have been called pathetic, and dismissed as fossil fools. Science would not allow one skeptic to respond to a critical review of his book, and *Scientific American* threatened to sue this same author for reprinting their critique of him on his website so he could respond to it.⁹ Were the case of the global warming advocates so strong, and that of their critics really so pathetic, this name calling and suppression of discussion would be entirely unnecessary.

But even though the tipping point may be a figment of writers and politicians imaginations; even though humans likely have lived (and survived) in climatic conditions similar to those of today in the past; even if some of the predictions are wrong and temperatures only go up another 1 degree C or so over the next hundred years; and even if current and likely future temperature increases do not bring about the cataclysmic events predicted by some; there are probably going to be changes in the environment that will force humans to make some adaptations. Sea levels may continue to rise gradually requiring changes in where people live, just as increased coastal erosion associated with sea ice changes may force some people in Alaska to move to new villages. Growing seasons may lengthen or shorten, to the advantage of people in some areas and the detriment of those living elsewhere. Changes in water cycles will similarly cause drying in some places and wetter conditions in others, altering agricultural practices and living conditions. All of this will be hard for the people affected, just as it was for the Viking people who had to abandon their settlements in Greenland¹⁰ hundreds of years ago when the climate cooled. Change is always difficult, especially for those who are poor, but the likely changes to come are hardly the apocalyptic ones that so many fear. And since the changes will be gradual, people will have time to adjust to altered conditions. It is likely that easily preventable health problems caused by obesity, tobacco, dirty water, and malaria will continue to cause more death and disease over the course of the next century than any effects of climate change.

Since poor people are the ones most likely to be harmed or disadvantaged by any adverse environmental changes, perhaps money would be better spent attempting to eradicate poverty than trying to control the weather. Instead of spending billions of dollars of money stolen from taxpayers around the world on studies and international conferences and carbon trading schemes, these funds could instead be dedicated to literacy programs for poor people, spreading mobile telephony to remote areas to facilitate trade and increase income among smallholders, cleaning up drinking water supplies, and judicious use of insecticides to prevent malaria. These relatively cheap interventions would likely get more bang for the buck in attenuating the effects of climate change than any of the grand schemes developed by the bureaucrats of the international community.

Who's to blame?

So, people are afraid of global warming. But what has been their response? Blame the oil companies, car manufacturers, and dirty industries, not to mention China and India, and then expect the government to fix the problem. Although the car makers manufacture polluting, energy-inefficient vehicles, no one has to buy them, and people's concerns about climate change, not to mention high gasoline prices, have not stopped them from purchasing and driving their SUVs, pickups and recreational vehicles. They have not stopped flying in airplanes. They have not stopped building and buying million dollar homes which are quite costly to heat and/or cool and are built on land made available by cutting down trees. As so often is the case, people want someone else to take responsibility for saving them.

And that someone is, as usual, the politicians and bureaucrats. This is despite their abysmal record of stewardship of the natural world. It was the work of the army corps of engineers that set the stage for the disaster in New Orleans last year. It is government subsidies, funded by the theft of tax money from working people, that encourage destructive and wasteful farming practices all over the world. It is management of the North American forests by government agencies and their uniformed agents that has set the stage for the recent spate of extensive and costly fires. It is government bailouts of people who build in dangerous coastal areas and choose not to buy insurance that encourage development in areas regularly wrecked by storms. With a record like this, why would anyone be willing to let a collection of governments, like those who developed the Kyoto protocol, dictate how to make things right?

While global warming skeptics are not infrequently dismissed as pawns of the petroleum industry, and surely some are, the promotion of authoritarian government action by global warming advocates calls their objectivity into question as well. Much of the research relied on by these alarmists is funded by government agencies, challenging the presumption that the researchers are disinterested scientists. While modern monopoly capitalist industries are avaricious and destructive, they are able to be so only because governments protect their privileges and property rights. How can the state be expected to discipline its partners? In addition, besides its inept management of the natural resources it has arrogated to itself, the state causes widespread direct damage to the environment, largely through its enormous military apparatus. Not only does the American death machine murder people outright, but it pollutes air, water, and food both in America and abroad. Expecting government action to save the environment is foolhardy.

Getting a perspective

While I question much of the global warming orthodoxy, I do realize that warming is taking place and people play some role in it, as they have for thousands of years. If the data concerning historic climate change are to be believed, the world is long overdue for an ice age, and it appears that at least part of the reason the glaciers have not reclaimed the northern continents is because of warming caused by human beings and their technology, largely agriculture. If not for the gases generated by farming practices, it is likely we would be in the middle of an ice age that should have started 5000 years ago. So, if temperatures stop rising and even start to fall, the next glacial period will come sooner rather than later. And whatever the problems caused by global warming, global cooling will likely be worse for more people.

How high the temperatures will go is the subject of debate, despite the claims from global warming advocates that all the data are in and the time for debate is over. Whatever changes come, they will be gradual and there is no reason to believe people will be unable to accommodate to them. This will cause burdens to many people, who will have to move their homes and perhaps change the kind of work they do, and, as usual, poorer people will be harder hit. But people, like all other parts of natural systems are capable of change and adaptation, and social and economic conditions would not be static even if the temperature were rock stable.

While some people feel they are being forced to change because of the decisions and actions of others in far-removed places on the globe, this is no more true in a

setting of climate change than it is at any other time. In an inter-connected world our actions have many unintended consequences elsewhere. When residents of coastal villages in Alaska are forced to move their homes because of erosion blamed, rightly or wrongly, on global warming, there may be resentment of people in more industrialized areas whose activities have contributed to the production of gases that contribute to higher temperatures. But the people in these villages, despite how they may be portrayed in the media, also use polluting technologies and contribute to the problem, as well as benefiting from the technologies employed elsewhere. This not to assign blame, but simply to point out that the problems of the world are complex and setting up a simple evildoer/victim dichotomy is not useful in solving them.

Though I expect some will misinterpret my efforts here, my intention is not to apologize for industrial society or minimize the real problems people may experience because of climate change. As I stated in the beginning of this article I believe it is important to question authority and critically examine the claims of all experts: political, economic, scientific, whatever. Making decisions based on inaccurate information and unjustified fears will not serve any of us, except of course the politicians and bureaucrats, who will just have one more excuse to increase their power and control over us.

Despite my human-centered approach in this article, I believe that people should be better neighbors to the other species with whom we share this world. I believe animals are not ours to eat, wear, or torture in medical or industrial research. I believe that forests and the bears within them, and rivers filled with salmon, and the moose that walk through the streets and yards of Anchorage are wonderful things which should not be destroyed by human beings for sport, but should be treated kindly and respectfully. I believe that a lower tech, decentralized, voluntary, cooperative, vegan society would produce a nicer, gentler, fairer world for both people and other organisms. But not because any of this is more natural; simply because it is how I believe the world should be and how I would like to live.

Notes

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