

ANALYSIS OF PUBLICATION-GRADE PAPER MARKETS • INDEPENDENT, COMPLETE AND CONCISE

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AND THE MODERN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT • PART I

“THE PLANET IS THE WARMEST IT HAS BEEN IN THOUSANDS OF YEARS — IF NOT MORE.”

Wall Street Journal, January 29, 2007

In the summer of 2005, my wife and I visited the island of Newfoundland. We drove from the beautiful port city of St. Johns, in the southeast, through the province, and into the northwest-ern tip, where the only confirmed Viking settlement in North America has been preserved for posterity. The evidence is, by the way, very convincing. There is no doubt that the Vikings arrived in America around 1,000 A.D.

The site was discovered in 1960 by a Norwegian writer and his archeologist wife. It is a fascinating story: in a nutshell, Helge Ingstad and Anne Stine simply followed the directions mentioned in two Viking sagas that were written down hun-dreds of years after the fact. Historians had considered these sagas as legend, although perhaps inspired by actual events. Helge believed, however, that these sagas might be accurate historical accounts, and he was correct.

The Viking explorers were based in Greenland. The primary reason for their excursions to North America was to harvest trees and export them back to Greenland. The Newfoundland site was a supply point. The actual trees were likely taken from Nova Scotia.

My wife and I joined a guided tour of the area given by a fourth-year university science student. He explained how the Vikings had named the newly discovered territory Vinland, because of the abundance of grapes, and that the climate was much warmer than it is today. He also offered examples of how this warmer climate had influenced plant life.

In spite of our first subtitle, the fact that the climate was warmer between 800 A.D. and 1300 A.D. than it is today was, and is, well known. That period is called the Medieval Warm Period (MWP). Paleoclimatologists use a variety of different methods — such as tree rings, ice cores, etc. — to estimate the history of climate change. Historical writings such as the Viking sagas also provide insight. The MWP was followed by the Little Ice Age (LIA) from 1300 to 1900 A.D.

This medieval warming period has been an uncomfortable fact for climatologists who claim that higher levels of greenhouse gases are causing today’s warming period. How could the Earth have been warmer 1,000 years ago when greenhouse gas levels were so much lower?

For the environmental movement, the “answer” came in 1998 when Michael Mann, a University of Virginia **climate statisti-cian**, undertook a study from which he concluded that there was no MWP and no LIA. He believed the Earth’s temperature had been relatively stable in comparison to today — until about 1900, that is, when temperatures began to increase. Even though this was only one study (and, as it turned out, a study with major defects) and contrary to the well-documented and well-established scientific consensus, it was immediately accepted as fact by environmental organizations around the world. For example, in 2001, the United Nation’s Intergovern-mental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) made the Mann study a central part of its Third Assessment Report. *(continued)*

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Since then, it has taken on a life of its own. If a lie is told often enough, and by “scientists” and respected media, it becomes conventional wisdom.

The *Wall Street Journal* did its part in perpetuating this mythology in a story on January 29, 2007 from which the previous subtitle was taken. Incidentally, other *Wall Street Journal* global-warming stories in recent weeks have been similarly alarmist, one-sided and lacking in foundation and depth.

After the Michael Mann study, others were carried out that discount Mann’s conclusion and re-affirm what has been known about natural climate change for many years. Two of the most important were carried out by Willie Soon (Harvard astrophysicist) and Canadians Stephen McIntyre and Ross McKittrick.

Willie Soon published *Reconstructing Climate and Environmental Changes of the Past 1,000 Years: A Reappraisal* in 2003. He reviewed **250 paleoclimate studies**. Based on those 250 studies, Willie Soon concluded that the MWP and the LIA did occur, and confirmed that worldwide climate was indeed warmer during the MWP than in the late 20th century.

Stephen McIntyre is a consultant for mineral exploration, and Ross McKittrick is a professor of economics. About two years ago, they published a review of Mann’s work in *Geophysical Research*. They found that the methodology Mann had used (including a data pre-processing step that was not reported in the original study) essentially guarantees the results he found! McIntyre and McKittrick demonstrated that the results of Mann’s study (that temperatures were stable until a sharp increase began 100 years ago) were not a function of a logical analysis of the evidence but of the methodology used. In other words, the methodology predetermined the results. Nevertheless, even though Mann’s work was discredited, his conclusion lives on.

I could find no other studies that have supported Mann’s conclusions. There are, however, a multitude of climate modelers and statisticians who fervently believe that the recent warming has been induced by human activity. They **choose** to believe that the current warming of the Earth cannot be explained by natural (non-human) forces, and therefore **must** believe that natural warming did not occur in medieval times.

Nearly all geologists and paleoclimatologists disagree. They argue that just because the modelers cannot explain natural

climate variability does not mean it does not exist. The data provides clear evidence that natural climate change does occur.

One of the key points here should not be missed. Climatologists make assumptions that go into their models that then “prove” that global warming is based on human activity/ higher levels of greenhouse gases. However, working backwards, these climate models do not explain the natural variation in climate that clearly occurred in the past. **If the models cannot predict accurately what occurred in the past, why would they accurately predict the future?** Climatologists recognize this problem, of course, so they simply ignore the evidence that the climate of the Earth changes naturally and believe what they want to believe.

That climatologists delude themselves is unfortunate, but that the politics of global warming have superceded science will be disastrous. We review one aspect of the debate on global warming in this section, and another is discussed later in this report. However, an objective review of the case for global warming would result in the identification of a number of conclusions not supported by scientific evidence.

The dangers to our society are enormous. You may think I am exaggerating. I promise you I am not. But how does this happen? How is mythology raised to common knowledge? John Kenneth Galbraith and the authors of *Freakonomics* tell us how it occurs, and why.

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AND PERSONAL INCENTIVES

John Kenneth Galbraith coined the term *conventional wisdom*. He explained that, **“We associate truth with convenience, with what most closely accords with self-interest and personal well-being, or promises best to avoid awkward effort or unwelcome dislocation of life. We also find highly acceptable what contributes to self esteem.”**

So conventional wisdom must be simple, comfortable, and comforting — though not necessarily true (i.e., consistent with an analysis of the facts). As a result, objective truths are almost inconsequential to the “truths” derived from conventional wisdom.

In *Reel Time*, we simply say, “people believe what they want to believe”; Galbraith provided an eloquent explanation for this phenomenon.

What Galbraith identifies as the more or less enduring human tendency toward conventional wisdom is exacerbated in the post-modern age we live in. Today it's the minority who believe that absolute truths exist and that they can, on occasion at least, be determined. **There is no social stigma or embarrassment associated with the irrational behavior of allowing personal desires to determine beliefs.**

Freakonomics, subtitled, *A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, is a recently published book that points out why, and how, conventional wisdoms are established.

How human behavior is influenced by incentives is a central theme of this book. The "rogue economist" Steven Levitt has more interest in the corrupting effect of incentives — as opposed to incentives that encourage what would be considered desirable behaviors. For example, he proves that a percentage of teachers cheat (change answers) on standardized tests to improve their students' scores, that Sumo wrestlers throw matches, that it does not always benefit real estate agents to strive for the highest prices for their clients, etc.

Levitt also emphasizes that experts (scientists and others) who have personal or financial incentives to reach a particular conclusion are often biased. Some can be objective and are willing to embrace conclusions that damage their finances and careers, but we don't usually read about these scientists in the mainstream media; and, as Levitt points out, the media plays a pivotal role. Conventional wisdoms are often, in fact, products of the marriage of modern media and their "expert" contributors.

Levitt writes:

*It may be **sad but not surprising to learn that experts can be self-interested to the point of deceit.** But they cannot deceive on their own. Journalists need experts as badly as experts need journalists. Every day there are newspaper pages and television newscasts to be filled, and an expert who can deliver a jarring piece of wisdom is always welcome. **Working together, journalists and experts are the architects of much conventional wisdom.***

In *Freakonomics*, Levitt told the story of an advocate for the homeless who claimed (to journalists and college audiences) that there were three million homeless Americans, and that 45 homeless people die each second — an annual total, therefore, of 1.4 billion dead homeless a year! When pressed, the homeless advocate later admitted he made up the data.

Also, according to Levitt:

*The typical expert is prone to sound exceedingly sure of himself. An expert doesn't so much argue the various sides of an issue as plant his flag firmly on one side. That's because an expert whose argument reeks of restraint or nuance often doesn't get much attention. An expert must be bold if he hopes to alchemize his homespun theory into conventional wisdom. His best chance of doing so is to engage the public's emotions, for emotion is the enemy of rational argument. **And as emotions go, one of them — fear — is more potent than the rest...mad-cow disease, crib death (global warming): how can we fail to heed the expert's advice on these horrors?***

About seven years ago, journalist Bob Garfield began tracking health articles in the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Times*. By the time he stopped counting; Garfield had discovered that, according to experts, 543 million Americans suffered from very serious medical conditions such as heart disease, cancer, brain injuries, diabetes, etc. Since there were only 266 million Americans at that time, this gives us a hint at the exaggeration we read in mainstream media.

SCIENCE IS UNBIASED, SCIENTISTS OFTEN HAVE AGENDAS

Do you believe that academics and real scientists have a stronger moral compass — that they are obligated to be impartial and objective? I hope not. Scientists, in fact, have powerful incentives to design studies and interpret results in such a manner that the outcome supports their personal needs. They are not immune to developing their own conventional wisdom. Scientists often "select" the truth that, as Galbraith explained, "most closely accords with self-interest and personal well-being...(and) contributes to self-esteem."

Books have been written on how science has been co-opted by philosophy. In the opening of this report, we discussed how one ill-conceived scientific study was popularized, and is sustained because the conclusions support the theories of the climate statisticians. Two additional short examples of bias follow. An important bigger picture story will be offered in Part II of this series of reports.

The first example is the publishing of the *Skeptical Environmentalist* by Bjorn Lomborg. Lomborg argued that claims by environmental organizations of global warming, overpopulation, declining energy resources, deforestation, species loss,

water shortages, etc., were unsupported by analysis of the relevant data. Lomborg's book was meticulously researched, with more than 3,000 footnotes, and has held up very well under intense scrutiny. How was Lomborg's work received by other "scientists"? In short, and for example, he was formally charged with academic dishonesty by the Union of Concerned Scientists and Danish Committees on Scientific Dishonesty (and later cleared). The Cambridge University Press came under intense pressure not to publish the book in English in 2001. *The Scientific American* printed a set of essays by several scientists disagreeing with Lomborg's findings, but refused to allow Lomborg to offer a point-by-point rebuttal. An environmentalist in London (apparently upset that Lomborg found the air in London cleaner than it's been in 400 years) threw a pie in Lomborg's face. Environmentalists did not agree with Lomborg's book, but their disagreements were disingenuous. It's philosophy, politics and self-interest, not science, that guide most environmental organizations.

The second example is a personal one and related to academia rather than science. I had an occasion a few years ago to gain a better understanding of how blatant pressure in academia could be. A friend of mine attended a big-ten university. His Ph.D. thesis compared the efficiency of union and non-union manufacturing operations. When the data confirmed the benefits of non-union operations, his thesis advisor required him to re-think his conclusions and explain the data differently. As an aside, my friend is a proud political liberal and he undertook this study hoping to prove the strength of union organizations. He was disappointed in the results of his study. However, he was distraught over being required to manipulate the data.

This was shocking to me. Objective truth often has little value in academia these days. Our colleges and universities have agendas. The politics of achieving academic tenure and advancing academic careers are vicious, and success often depends on adopting a post-modern philosophy that includes support for everything labeled "environmental." In addition, of course, grants from private foundations and governments are "big business" for universities. The more serious the environmental problem is perceived to be, the more money that becomes available.

Self-Interest and Deceit (Often) Go Hand in Hand

It is interesting to address specific global warming issues from a scientific perspective, and then compare the study results

with the conclusions of the scientists involved, as well as with what we read/hear in the media and in environmental literature. The following is a review of a specific claim made by some environmental groups. In the process, however, **we also found an opportunity to demonstrate the difference between the results of scientific studies and the conclusions scientists make.**

One of the mythical results of global warming is that the population of the island nation of Tuvalu has been forced to leave their homeland due to the rising sea level. A version of this story can be found at www.truehealth.org/climnw05.html. The title is *Tuvalu — First Victim of Rising Ocean Levels*. (The original source of the report was the Earth Policy Institute.)

The copy at the top of the opening page reads as follows:

The leaders of Tuvalu — a tiny island country in the Pacific Ocean midway between Hawaii and Australia — have conceded defeat in their battle with the rising sea, announcing that they will abandon their homeland. After being rebuffed by Australia, the Tuvaluans asked New Zealand to accept its 11,000 citizens, but it has not agreed to do so.

Then a photograph demonstrates the problem. Three people are lying half-submerged on the beach, but fully clothed. Apparently the sea was rising so rapidly around them that they did not have time to escape. Below the picture is the caption "one of the many costs of deforestation".

The article continues in this vein until the rhetoric peaks at the close.

Many developing countries already coping with population growth and intense competition for living space and cropland now face the prospect of rising sea levels and substantial land losses. Some of those most directly affected have contributed the least to the buildup in atmospheric CO₂ that is causing this problem.

While Americans are facing loss of valuable beachfront properties, low-lying island peoples are facing something far more serious; the loss of their nationhood. They feel terrorized by U.S. energy policy, viewing the United States as a rogue nation, indifferent to their plight and unwilling to cooperate with the international community to implement the Kyoto Protocol.

For the first time since civilization began, the sea level has begun to rise at a measurable rate. It has become an indicator to watch, a trend that could force a human migration of almost unimaginable dimensions.

In preparation for this report, studies on sea levels were reviewed. Two are mentioned here. The first is a study of a Rutgers geological science team led by Professor Kenneth Miller. This Rutgers science team found, in their study, that sea levels rose at a steady rate of one millimeter per year from 5,000 years ago — until about 200 years ago, when ocean levels began to rise at an average rate of two millimeters per year. (Whether the results of this study are correct or not cannot be known at this time. Their sea-level estimates of the distant past are in conflict with other reports I have reviewed. However, the study results for recent history are similar to others, so we will assume that their sea-level estimates are more or less accurate.)

At first blush, we might conclude that increasing CO₂ levels in the atmosphere have created a warmer earth, melted glaciers, and caused sea levels to increase more rapidly than they had been previously. That is, in fact, exactly what Professor Miller concluded, “The main thing that’s changed since the 19th century...has been the widespread increase in fossil fuel use and more greenhouse gasses.” So Miller believes the results of his study provides evidence that global warming, and higher sea levels, have been caused by increased levels of greenhouse gasses.

But in the three study summaries I read, Miller does not claim there has been any acceleration in the increase in sea levels over the last 200 years. This is obviously a crucial factor. If CO₂ levels related to higher sea levels, wouldn’t we expect the impact to be imperceptible in the early 1800s, when the human contribution of CO₂ was minimal? We certainly would not expect the rate of the sea-level increase to double at the onset of the industrial revolution and then remain unchanged as CO₂ levels increased exponentially over the following 200 years. After all, more than 80% of carbon dioxide due to human activity entered the atmosphere after 1940! (*Imprimis*, March 2002.)

It’s certainly possible the increase in CO₂ levels in the atmosphere is having an impact on our climate. However, the results of this study do not provide evidence that rising sea levels are related to increasing levels of CO₂.

If a scientist carried out a study to determine if there was a link between two variables, such as, for example, a nation’s GDP (growing at a consistent pace for the last 200 years) and the percentage of the population graduating from high school (near zero 200 years ago, but increasing dramatically since the 1940s) that scientist would assume no correlation, and certainly no causation. Miller’s study results do not support his conclusion.

The second report is, in effect, a long review in Wikipedia (17 pages) in which a number of scientific reports relating to sea levels are discussed. The section I found particularly interesting was a discussion of the Tuvalu myth. Wikipedia makes the following observations:

IPCC assessments have suggested that deltas and small island states may be particularly vulnerable to sea level rise. “Relative sea level rise (mostly caused by subsidence) is causing substantial loss of lands in some deltas.”

However, sea level changes have not yet been implicated in any substantial environmental, humanitarian, or economic losses to small island states. Previous claims have been made that parts of the island nation of Tuvalu were “sinking” as a result of sea level rise. However, subsequent reviews have suggested that the loss of land was the result of erosion during and following the actions of 1997 cyclones Gavin, Hina, and Keli. The islands in question were not [even] populated.... According to Patrick J. Michaels, ‘in fact, areas such as [the island of] Tuvalu show substantial declines in sea level over that period.’

It should be mentioned that although sea levels have been increasing for thousands of years, it is an uneven process. At any point in time, some oceans will be increasing more than the average and others will be decreasing.

So in summary, the True Health and Earth Policy Institute report on Tuvalu is just about as valid as that of the homeless advocate who claimed that 1.4 billion homeless Americans die every year.

The sea level has been rising slowly for thousands of years. It is still rising slowly, although not so slowly as it was 200 years ago. This is a concern, but we do not make progress by exaggerating the problem, and making unjustified conclusions as to the cause.

Science or Philosophy

The educational system in the U.S., from kindergarten through Ph.D. level, is steeped in post-modern philosophy. Our educational institutions are charged with producing students who challenge conventional norms and think independently. In actuality, post-modernism and the political correctness it fosters requires students to “feel” and “believe” rather than to analyze, challenge and find a better way.

As mentioned by Levitt, the media also plays a major role in confirming the tenets of this post-modern movement — as do politicians who support these views.

Environmentalism is a central tenet of this post-modern philosophy and global warming is central to the environmental movement. *The Economist* recently published a long and interesting report on global warming. It contained the expected biases, but it was still very informative and some key points were made. The following statement is surprisingly candid, and confirms the point.

“(The debate on global warming) is charged by the belief on one side that life as we know it is under threat, and by the conviction on the other that scientists and socialists are conspiring to spend taxpayers’ money on a bogey. **It is sharpened by a moral angle — the sense, deep in the heart of the environmental movement, that the consequence of individual selfishness will be collective doom: The invisible hand is a fist, and original sin an SUV.**”

And this is the issue! It’s not about the environment. It’s a distrust and disdain for capitalism and the free-market system. It’s about control. And its anti-consumerism emphasis hits directly at the excesses the world sees in the U.S. — further delighting the academic elites who prefer to think of themselves as citizens of the world. They just get paid by American taxpayers.

But objectivity does matter to *Reel Time* readers. Right? So we do our best to base conclusions on scientific evidence and not philosophy.

Part II

There will be at least one more report in this series. The bias of scientists will again be discussed, but the emphasis will be on forestry and how it relates to atmospheric carbon levels.

Your feedback is appreciated. If a “different” point of view on environmental issues is helpful, send me an e-mail or give me a call. I will try to find time to extend the series. There is certainly no lack of interesting environmental issues to review. □

— Verle Sutton

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