One Skeptic's View of the Global Warming Controversy*

*Oh, I almost forgot—there is no controversy!

GARY P. POSNER

Tampa Bay Skeptics Report, which I edit, first broached the subject of anthropogenic global warming (AGW) in earnest in our Spring 2009 issue (see tampabayskeptics.org/v21n4rpt.html). My essay was motivated in part by syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman (and others, including Al Gore) comparing AGW skeptics to "Holocaust deniers." I ended my piece, in which I presented the reasons for "my doubts about the existence of a man-made global warming crisis," with this thought: "I continue to seek the truth, and acknowledge that my current opinions, shared by thousands of knowledgeable scientists, could be wrong. It seems to me that such a principled position is the hallmark of scientific skepticism. But, then again, maybe I'm just nuts."

Later, in the January/February 2010 *Skeptical Inquirer*, I addressed the matter of scientists skeptical of an AGW crisis being portrayed not so much as "nuts" but, more precisely, as lacking "credibility" and in many cases being outright "fake." The offender was the Center for Inquiry's Office of Public Policy (OPP) in Washington, which had disseminated a "Dear Citizen" announcement about an upcoming CFI event in DC in which they said, "You will hear about . . . an OPP-sponsored project exposing 'fake' scientists who oppose global warming" (i.e., who are skeptical of an AGW crisis). This announcement was followed by *Skeptical Inquirer*'s September/October 2009 post-event article outlining CFI's position on AGW. Though CFI had by now dropped the "fake" accusation and acknowledged that "there were indeed some quite well-known scientists" represented, the article was subtitled, "CFI vets list of 687 'dissenting scientists' in Senate minority report; 80% haven't published peer-reviewed climate research."

But CFI's effort, which it dubbed "The Credibility Project," neglected to comparably vet the list of United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) scientists, under the assumption that significantly more than 20 percent of them *had* published such research. Unless this assumption can be validated, the credibility of CFI's own "Credibility Project" is brought into question. My research has come up empty as far as ascertaining anything closer than the following "guess." As fellow skeptic Robert Sheaffer, long a *Skeptical Inquirer* columnist and contributing editor, pointed out in my SI article, Prof. William Schlesinger, one of the lead authors of the IPCC report, when questioned during a February 11, 2009, debate, had said, "[My] guess [is] that something in the order of 20% [of the IPCC scientists] have some dealing with climate" (see tinyurl.com/GW-debate, beginning at 3:35 of this portion of the video).

Prof. Schlesinger's 20 percent "guess," should it happen to be an educated and reasonably accurate one, would mean that roughly 80 percent of the IPCC scientists have *no professional dealing at all* with climate, whereas many among the 80 percent group of CFI-vetted "dissenting scientists" do (even if they haven't published peer-reviewed studies). One can thus at least wonder whether *their* "credibility" credentials (other than, of course, being on the "nuts" side of the issue) might even surpass those of the IPCC scientists.

The previously referenced "Senate minority report" (see tinyurl.com/SenMinRpt) refers to the December 2008 dissenting document released by U.S. Senator James Inhofe, the ranking Republican member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. Inhofe and other Bible believers, because of their proclaimed disbelief in such concepts as evolution, are often summarily dismissed as being "anti-science." But is that truly the case? When, for example, such persons flip on a light switch, do they expect the room to become illuminated because God receives their message and declares "Let there be light," or do they trust electrical theory to accomplish the task? Even if one finds both traits to be lacking, one must appreciate the distinction between "anti-science" and "God-fearing."

Getting back to Robert Sheaffer, his harshly critical July/August 2010 *Skeptical Inquirer* piece, written in response to several recent articles in SI labeling AGW skeptics as "science-challenged" and promoters of "disinformation," was met with equally harsh rebuttal. While taking on the most contentious scientific issues point by point, Sheaffer likened the AGW "Climate Wars" (SI's term) to earlier historical scientific controversies in which "defenders . . . fell victim to a politically driven perversion of science [and] failed to see the problems because they were blinded by their ideology." Of course, those to whom Sheaffer was alluding would say the same of him.

And when they got their turn a few pages later, Sheaffer (and others like him) were indeed accused of "extreme gullibility," practicing "conditional skepticism [in rejecting] things they don't like," and of "preferring to believe accusations from the lobbyists and talk-show hosts." But whatever one's ideological worldview, one thing Sheaffer said rings relatively uncontroversial: "When a new and not yet firmly established scientific theory suddenly appears and finds fierce support from those of certain political persuasions, labeling those who question it as stupid and/or evil persons, you can be reasonably sure that you have stumbled upon some practitioners of *advocacy science*" (emphasis in original). He later added, "If nothing else, the AGW debacle can be used as an example of the ultimately self-correcting nature of science, even in the face of powerfully entrenched interests."

But given the continuing unrelenting

assault on AGW skepticism—even the expanding Antarctic ice sheets are being "blamed" on AGW—I found myself motivated to confide the following to Sheaffer in an email in May 2012:

> When I first began thinking and writing about AGW, though it is not a paranormal-type proposition like, say, UFOs or ESP, I nevertheless considered it an extraordinary-enough claim that our default position should be the "null" hypothesis, with the burden of proof being on the claimant. But . . . the "appeal to authority" is weighing more and more heavily on me, and the thought is beginning to occur to me that non-AGW might now be the more extraordinary hypothesis.

Sheaffer's reply focused in large part on the role Judith Curry (see judithcurry.com), head of the School of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at the Georgia Institute of Technology, is playing in the international dialogue. From that reply:

> Curry . . . is a believer in AGW, however she is an honest scientist and free of any discernible [partisan] agenda. She believes that CO_2 will affect our future climate. However, she admits to tremendous uncertainties in the models, conceding that the effects might be very small. She admits that some of the critics have made entirely valid points, and she warns that politics has made dangerous inroads into climate science. For this, she has been all but anathematized by her colleagues. In the Climategate II emails, Michael Mann says something like, "I don't know what Judith Curry thinks she's doing, but she isn't helping the cause." Anyone who speaks about "the cause," repeatedly, as he does, is not [so much] a researcher [as a] political activist.

As for the oft-repeated claim that 2012 was warmer than 2011, which was warmer than 2010, and so on—seemingly shredding the point I made in my 2009 essay that "the earth's latest warming trend may have actually plateaued a decade ago"—London's *Daily Mail* ran an article on October 13, 2012, titled, "Global warming stopped 16 years ago, reveals Met Office [the U.K.'s national weather service] report quietly released" (see tinyurl.com/GW-plateau). One of its bulleted subheads: "The figures reveal that from the beginning of 1997 until August 2012 there was no discernible rise in aggregate global temperatures." The reporter quotes Curry (the bracketed passage is verbatim from the original):

> Climate models are very complex, but they are imperfect and incomplete. Natural variability [the impact of factors such as long-term temperature cycles in the oceans and the output of the sun] has been shown over the past two decades to have a magnitude that dominates the greenhouse warming effect. It is becoming increasingly apparent that our attribution of warming since 1980 and future projections of climate change needs to consider natural internal variability as a factor of fundamental importance.

The Met Office, like virtually all other scientific institutions in the world, has noted Earth's warming trend during the twentieth century. But unlike some, it seems to appreciate why many of those organizations' rank-and-file find themselves among the AGW skeptics. Thus, in 2010, it proposed "a new international analysis of land surface air temperature data [using] verifiable datasets starting from a common databank of unrestricted data [and] methods that are fully documented in the peer-reviewed literature and open to scrutiny."

There's the rub: "open to scrutiny." When confronting a claim that seems a bit questionable, we skeptics generally have no problem demanding that it be subjected not simply to further inquiry but to "critical scrutiny." But when Judith Curry champions for just that sort of rigor with regard to the "consensus" claims about AGW—which for the most part she embraces—her efforts are met with accusations of heresy, as detailed in an enlightening October 25, 2010, *Scientific American* article (see tinyurl.com/SciAmCurry).

And, of course, no discussion of AGW could be complete without mentioning Superstorm Sandy. Al Gore and others have asserted—as with Hurricane Katrina—that its ferocity was the result of AGW. But anyone with even a rudimentary understanding of meteorology knows the following to be true. A category 1 or 2 hurricane forming in the Caribbean during October and heading up the eastern U.S. coastline is hardly a once-in-a-century (or two) aberration. Nor is a "nor'easter." What caused those two unrelated storms to fuse into an explosive hybrid was nothing related to global warming but rather the presence of a *high-pressure* area (the *opposite* of a storm), with its clockwise circulation, sitting to the east of northern New England and acting like a "Road Closed—All Traffic Must Turn Left" barricade. And it didn't help that the shit happened to hit the fan at high tide. Had these same weather elements converged in the pre-industrialized era, the meteorological result would have been the same.

So, where does this skeptic now stand on the issue of AGW? Pretty much where I began. There's no doubt that the planet's temperature rose during the twentieth century. But unless I really am "nuts," it remains to be seen whether the current plateau—which IPCC chairman Rajendra Pachauri has recently opined could last "30–40 years at least" without breaking the uptrend (see tinyurl.com/IPCC-plateau)—eventually ends with a continuation of the warming trend, or with the significant cooling that many scientists fear may soon be in store due to natural cyclical changes in the oceanic oscillations and solar activity (i.e., the looming lull in sunspots reducing the solar wind of charged particles whizzing by our planet, thus fewer cosmic rays being deflected away from our atmosphere and more of them seeding cloud formation). I'm not predicting that it will, but should this pretty cool scenario win out, it will be interesting to see if any eggs remain available in the supermarkets, since so many will be needed to cover the faces of the world's most elite scientists, politicians, journalists, and environmental activists.

Postscript

In the months since I first submitted this article for publication, global warming continues to be widely portrayed as "happening even faster than previously estimated" (as reiterated in the May/June 2013 *Skeptical Inquirer*). Nevertheless, articles about scientists' puzzlement over the sixteen-or-so-year plateau have appeared this year in such venues as *The Economist* (tinyurl.com/economist-warming) and the Reuters news service (tinyurl.com/reuters-warming). Even NASA's James Hansen wrote in January (tinyurl.com/hansen 2013-warming) that "the 5-year running mean of global temperature has been flat for the past decade" (meaning flat global temperatures for the past fifteen years), though he predicts that the "global temperature will rise significantly in the next few years as the tropics moves [*sic*] inevitably to the next El Nino phase." Time will tell. □

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Reply to Critique from Gary Posner, MD, of the Center for Inquiry's 'Credibility Project'

STUART JORDAN

In the winter of 2009–2010, it came to the attention of the Center for Inquiry Office of Public Policy (OPP) that Senator James Inhofe had issued a *United States Senate Minority Report on Global Warming* (accessible at http://epw.senate.gov). As Science Advisor to the OPP at that time, I was skeptical of this Senate report. The Policy Director of the OPP at that time, Toni Van Pelt, then introduced me to a young man trained in atmospheric and space science and working in Washington for the *Astrophysical Journal*. Thomas O'Brien agreed to vet for us the 687 scientists in this Senate report to see how many of them might be well qualified in climate science and related studies. Thanks to the efforts of Mr. O'Brien, who worked under my general direction, we produced *The Credibility Project* report (accessible at www.centerforinquiry.net/OPP/CredibilityProject).

Our criterion for assessment was publication in the referred literature. On this basis, we found that of the 687 individuals claiming to be skeptical about human causation of global warming, approximately 15 percent could be said to publish in fields at least related to climate science.

Recently Gary Posner, MD, of the Tampa Bay Skeptics has renewed the critique of this OPP Credibility Project study in an article submitted to the SKEPTICAL BRIEFS. He asks why the OPP did not also vet the 2007 Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). He goes on to quote another scientist's guess "that something in the order 20 percent [of the IPCC scientists] have some dealing with climate." I will demonstrate below that 20 percent is a *huge underestimate* of the fraction of IPCC scientists familiar with climate change who were responsible for the IPCC science report.

It is important to note that there are three IPCC-2007 reports and that only one is the science report. This is *Climate Change 2007–The Physical Science Basis*, the report of Working Group I. In response to Dr. Posner, I "vetted" the science chapters in the *Science Basis Report*. Recall that our goal is to assess the fraction of the contributors to IPCC-2007 *Science Basis Report* who have actually done climate science or science relevant to climate science and have published in the referred literature, to see if this greatly exceeds 20 percent.

Examining Chapters 2–11 in the above science report produced the following relevant data. (Chapter 1 is a summary chapter.) There are 684 authors who wrote these ten chapters, identified as "Lead Authors, Contributing Authors, and Review Authors." To see if these authors were also doing research relevant to climate science themselves, I examined the bibliographies of each chapter and found that approximately 67 percent of them were first authors of papers in the corresponding bibliographies, which when examined contained almost exclusively peer reviewed articles in journals reporting research results in science fields directly relevant to climate science. All working scientists know that first authors are usually the leaders of a published study. Many of the other 684 authors who were not listed as first authors appeared as supporting authors on papers referenced.

However, the total number of research papers in all of the ten bibliographies exceeds 5,500. I was conservative and used the number 5,500 papers in all bibliographies. In Chapter 2, where there are 757 papers in the bibliography, these papers were written by 514 first authors, who often had coauthors who are not counted. That averages to 1.47 papers per first author. Examining all chapters, we find an average of ~1.5 papers per first author in this entire science report. Dividing 5,500 by 1.5 yields a conservative estimate of 3,667 first authors of referred papers in the IPCC-2007 *Physical Science Basis Report*. These people are all scientists working in fields directly relevant to climate science, and practically everyone is publishing in the referred literature. To see if this number should be reduced because a few climate scientists appear frequently in several of the ten bibliographies, I checked for several of the best known, such as James Hansen. The effect was real, but small, and smaller than the number of other scientists who were not first authors but coauthors on these refereed papers. We can safely conclude that at least 100 percent of 3,667 individual scientists in the ten bibliographies satisfy the criterion that they have published in the peer reviewed literature in fields directly relevant to climate science.

Now we can compare this number to the 15 percent of scientists in the Senate Minority Report who were found to be doing "climate science or science related to climate science" as tested by papers in the referred literature. Fifteen percent of 687 individuals is 103 scientists, which is 2.81 percent of our conservative estimate of 3,667 scientists in the IPCC-2007 *Physical Science Basis* report. The Credibility Project stands. The suggestion that the IPCC-2007 science report is no better than the Senate Minority report does not conform to the evidence. □

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