

AGW not a paradigm

Walter Starck
5 August 2006

The following was originally posted on the Climate Skeptics discussion list and subsequently on Jennifer Marohasy's blog on Australian environmental issues.
<http://www.jennifermarohasy.com/blog/>

=====

The AGW debate is not about a paradigm shift or even about a basic theory. No one is arguing that CO₂ does not absorb IR or that burning fossil fuel does not add CO₂ to the atmosphere. In essence the AGW debate is about whether increasing CO₂ by a few hundredths of one percent of the atmosphere will have catastrophic consequences on global climate. AGW proponents claim scientific certainty that it will and cite as proof a 0.6 degree C increase in average global temperature over the past century, a putative increase in extreme weather events and predictions of ongoing future warming based on computer models of global climate. Skeptics find significant uncertainty in the amount, causes and consequences of any warming and in the accuracy of the models. They point to major doubts regarding the amount and cause of recent warming, past extremes that equal or exceed recent ones, benefits of CO₂ enrichment plus numerous simplifications, guesses and omissions in the models as well as wide discrepancies between them.

No amount or strength of argument seems likely to resolve this debate before reality irrefutably intrudes. Barring a major global recession anthropogenic CO₂ emissions will continue to increase for at least the next few decades and the truth or fantasy of AGW will become increasingly apparent.

On the skeptic side a good case has been put forward for an important role in solar variability on climate via an effect on cloud cover. This theory fits well with past climatic fluctuations and most importantly, it predicts future ones. Of these, the most significant is the Landscheidt Minimum around 2030 which should be comparable to the LIA.

Whether anthropogenic CO₂ is forcing global climate toward catastrophic warming or solar cycles are the dominant control should become strongly indicative in the next decade and near conclusive over the following one. For skeptics to win this debate by superior evidence and argumentation would probably take longer than letting reality settle it. The more important role for skeptics is to provide an opposing balance against hysteria and to define what is to be learned from the whole affair. This is unlikely to come from true believers no matter what the actual outcome.

AGW proponents on the whole seem to be afflicted with a desire for certainty and intolerance of any suggestion of doubt while skeptics seem more concerned about dogmatism and false claims of certainty than they are of the possible reality of AGW. This difference in perspective reflects a fundamental divergence in the very essence of

the scientific enterprise. Is it primarily a belief , a sphere of activity and a career or is it a particular philosophical approach to understanding based on empirical evidence, logical consistency and verifiability? Is the higher aim to provide authority for belief or to keep it open to question and better understanding? Is there a deficiency in scientific training that produces highly trained technicians but not the doctors of philosophy their degrees proclaim?

Also inherent in this divergence of perspective is the attitude to risk. Is it something to avoided at all costs (as enshrined in the precautionary principle) or something to be accepted or rejected on the basis of evaluation?

In the case of AGW it increasingly seems that such underlying issues may well be more important than the actual debate itself.