



Why We Should Act to Stop Global Warming—and Why We Won't

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Last week, when I was all over the Heartland fakes, people demanded to know why I don't post more about the problem of global warming, if I'm all in favor of a carbon tax and all. That's a somewhat complicated answer, so bear with me.

The first reason I don't post a lot is that I'm not an expert, and I'm not planning to become one. I've basically outsourced my opinion on the science to people like Jonathan Adler, Ron Bailey, and Pat Michaels of Cato—all of whom concede that anthropogenic global warming is real, though they may contest the likely extent, or desired remedies.

If they say the planet is warming, then I trust that this is very likely to be true—not just because I like them, but because if you've convinced leading libertarians that humans are contributing to global warming, you've convinced me.

Climate skeptics are going to call this a cop-out, and I understand why, but here's the thing: I cannot be an expert on everything. I don't know what the speed limit should be, how we should redesign the military to counter 21st century threats, or the best way to allocate scarce water resources between competing claims, even though I recognize that in a modern society, these are all the proper concerns of the government; even though I think that these questions are important, I am willing to leave them to experts on traffic patterns, national defense, and water rights. So with global warming. Time spent brushing up on the science is time spent not reading up on things where I have greater comparative advantage, like tax policy or the budget.

So I don't blog about the science, because what am I going to say? "This article I don't understand very well sure sounds convincing?" And I don't blog about the economics because they're so damn depressing.

Years ago, when I was a young journalist, I was locked in an ongoing debate with a fellow journalist who kept proclaiming that the European carbon trading scheme was practically the greatest thing since the invention of breathing. I would point out that it didn't, well, seem to be working. At least, not if by "working" you meant "reducing carbon emissions".

"That's because it had growing pains," this journalist would assure me.

After one such exchange, I remarked to a colleague that the European carbon trading scheme was beginning to very much remind me of [this](#):

I once saw a comedian doing a bit about some blues musician. "I have all thirteen of his albums," said the comedian. "As far as I can tell, he's having some trouble with his woman."

Audience roar.

"I keep buying each new album," continued the comedian, "thinking 'This time it's going to be different. This is going to be the happy album. This is going to be where he gets it all together.' I just downloaded his fourteenth album tonight."

Audience chuckle. Long pause.

"He's still having some trouble with his woman."

And indeed, years later . . . it's [still having a spot of trouble](#). I believe Europe managed to meet its Kyoto targets, but thanks largely to two factors: the global economic collapse of 2008, and two secular shifts (the closure of heavily polluting East German factories; the British shift from coal to natural gas as their cost-effective coal supply ran low) that had nothing to do with environmental targets.

This for a set of targets that, from the planet's perspective, did roughly nothing to delay the onset of global warming. If it's this hard to make weak targets work, how are we going to get a global consensus for strong ones?

Addressing global warming is the mother of all collective action problems. The reductions needed to avoid catastrophe are very sizeable, and they must occur across the globe. Yet fossil fuel resources are fungible. Oil that is not burned in the United States does not stay tidily in the ground; it gets shipped somewhere else, like China. This is especially true these days, when there's basically no spare capacity; close to every available barrel is being pumped.

In this environment, lowering our oil consumption lowers the price, but not supply. This is a nice charitable gift to emerging nations, but the climate does not care whether the carbon comes from fat, disgusting Americans thundering around in their mongo SUVs, or soulful Indian peasants getting their first tractor. It will warm up, or not, just the same.

And I've seen no evidence that the Chinese, or the Indians, plan to do much of anything to reduce their emissions in the near-term. They talk a bunch about green initiatives, which makes westerners all excited, but from what I can tell, their green initiatives with

teeth are aimed at reducing their deadly, ubiquitous air pollution, not their carbon emissions. Oh, they may reduce the carbon intensity of their Gross Domestic Product as their economy upskills. But the United States is actually [relatively carbon-efficient per dollar of GDP](#) compared to China or India. It's just that we have a lot more dollars worth of GDP.

For China to grow while merely holding its emissions steady--and their carbon output already surpasses [ours and Canada's combined](#)--then the improvement in carbon intensity will have to match their rate of growth. So far, this hasn't happened, and given that China has vast coal deposits that it's using to bring electricity to its citizens, it doesn't seem likely to in the near future. Yes, they've made a big investment in solar panel production . . . for export to rich countries that subsidize them.

I'm not criticizing China or India, mind you--I'd be less than enthusiastic about a bunch of rich countries telling me that I wasn't allowed to get rich, too, because that would be bad for the planet. But I don't find the alternative--a one-for-one offset by the rich world--very plausible either. Energy is a key input into GDP. And note how cranky we've gotten about a fairly small and temporary reduction in our national income.

The best hope is that policy in the rich world leads to innovations which make alternatives to carbon super cheap. But we should also take seriously [Jim Manzi's objections](#).

So why do I still support action--especially, climate skeptics demand, when the science is so uncertain?

Well, because we've only got the one climate. I don't like running large one-way experiments on vital systems we don't know how to fix. The risk of a catastrophic outcome may be small, but it would be pretty darn terrible to find out that hey, we hit the jackpot!

Of course, in some sense, this is a cheap belief, because I don't think that we're going to do anything about it--nay, not even if Megan McArde spends all her time advocating for such an outcome. The forces arrayed against action are just too powerful--and no, I don't mean the Cato Institute.

Indeed, I think that this is where [Peter Gleick](#) went off the rails. As much as I disagree with Heartland on global warming, they may influence a bare handful of people. What really influences people is contemplating their own lives with doubled or tripled electric bills and \$8 a gallon gas. To paraphrase Chesterton, serious belief in global warming--the kind that makes you stop climbing aboard \$@#! planes to climate change conferences in scenic and distant locales--has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried.

Even if he'd found something much more damaging than he managed to fish out of their confidential files, it wouldn't have meaningfully altered the global warming policy debate. That debate really isn't much about whether this is happening, because most people don't have the scientific background, the intellectual ability, or the interest to

determine whether this is happening. (I am speaking now of both sides: the average person who drips contempt for those mouth-breathing climate deniers has exactly as much personal knowledge about climate change as some talk radio host arguing that global warming is a crock because hey, it snowed last week!)

No, the debate is about how unpleasant it would be to prevent it--which really isn't much of a debate, either, because the obvious answer is "very, except maybe for DINK urbanites". And that's where the discussion pretty much stalls out.