

The New York Times

DOT EARTH

Nine Billion People. One Planet.

AUGUST 3, 2009, 7:54 PM

Can Climate Panel Have Climate Impact?

By *ANDREW C. REVKIN*

I have an article in Tuesday's [Science Times](#) assessing next steps for the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#). The panel, which shared the [Nobel Peace Prize in 2007](#), was created in 1988 under the United Nations Environment Program and World Meteorological Organization to aid governments by periodically reviewing the accumulated research on the causes and consequences of climate change and possible responses. But it was proscribed from recommending particular courses of action.

The task of being policy relevant but policy neutral has become ever tougher, it seems. The [massive reports](#) and shorter [summaries](#) are certainly relevant to global and national energy policies, describing the possible climatic outcomes of a wide range of societal paths, from business as usual to aggressive emissions curbs. But so far, as the article notes, there's scant evidence that world leaders, while lauding the climate panel and publicly accepting its periodic conclusions, are taking them to heart.

Tanushree Punwani/Reuters Rajendra Pachauri celebrating word that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was a recipient of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

That disconnect has prompted some leaders of the climate panel, including Rajendra K. Pachauri, its chairman since 2002, to speak out strongly in favor of certain policy choices, from [deep cuts in emissions by developed countries](#) to steps taken on energy and climate by [President Obama and Congress](#) in the United States.

In an interview, Dr. Pachauri readily acknowledged that he presses for particular actions, but said he does so as an individual. He said this does not present a conflict. "When I quote from the I.P.C.C. I make sure that whatever I say is totally accurate," he said. "But that doesn't prevent me from expressing my own views. I do get criticism, but if you stand still you won't get anywhere."

[Gerbrand Komen](#), who was the longtime head of the Dutch government delegation at climate-panel plenary meetings and is a former [director of climate research](#) at the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute, said that the climate panel is, in essence, presenting mixed messages and assuming mixed roles.

"I like to distinguish people trying to understand the world and people trying to change the world," Dr. Komen said in an email. "I.P.C.C. ('policy relevant, but not policy prescriptive') is in between. In all three groups [the climate panel's working groups on the science, impacts and adaptive response and mitigation of human-caused warming] there are people that ignore uncertainty bands, and emphasize extremes, for various reasons: be it curiosity or the wish to

influence policy. Modelers sometimes tend to forget that their models are only models.”

Discussions of climate science and policy have seen endless fights over the appropriate role of scientists. Should they limit themselves to [laying out the evidence, uncertainties and all](#), and let society respond however it may? Or should they be as free as any citizen to dive into the policy debate, as [James Hansen of NASA](#) and Dr. Pachauri (who is [an engineer and economist](#)) have done?

And if you endorse such actions by Dr. Hansen, can you criticize them when the scientist/advocate stakes an entirely different ideological or economic position? In 2007, on the [C-Span program “Close Up at the Newseum,”](#) I asked Patrick J. Michaels, a climatologist working with the Cato Institute who unabashedly labels his work “[advocacy science](#),” just what that phrase means. He offered a defense reaching back to Thomas Jefferson’s encouragement of scientists to be citizens.

In the end, many people in this arena insist, the science frames the discussion, providing the best picture of consequences and opportunities while laying out ranges of risk and uncertainty. In its 21 years, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has played a unique role in facilitating just that framing, many panel members and experts on science and policy say.

But in the end, I hear again and again, science doesn’t have a role in telling society what to do. If only things were that simple. [Kenneth Caldeira](#), a climate specialist whom I’ve interviewed about ocean acidification, geo-engineering, climate tipping points and other questions, says there is substantial peril in “describing policy prescriptions as if they’re a scientific conclusion.”

He bases his thinking on some fundamentals of philosophy, as [laid out by Thomas Hume](#) long ago. “You can’t get an ought from an is,” Dr. Caldeira told me.

(I’ll be posting more thoughts on the future of the climate panel that I received from climate scientists and others working in this area in the comment thread below.)