



My Turn: Human tragedy on a scale the world has never seen

By: Linda Thompson – May 14, 2013

A recent My Turn in *The Taos News* puzzled and surprised me. I have been concerned about greenhouse gases and their effects on our planet and our lives since 1990, when I reviewed David E. Fisher's *Fire & Ice: The Greenhouse Effect, Ozone Depletion & Nuclear Winter* (Harper & Row) for the Sierra Club's San Francisco Bay Area newsletter, the Yodeler. Now, I have another book on my lap for review: *Overheated: The Human Cost of Climate Change* by Andrew Guzman (Oxford University Press, 2013). Guzman is a professor of law at the University of California, Berkeley.

Before presenting some of Guzman's conclusions, I visited the website that the April 25 opinion piece called "a single source of all the news on climate change," www.climatedepot.com, developed by David Rothbard and Craig Rucker. I found it to be a typical stage for political lobbyists (funded in part by oil and automobile industrial interests). If you Google these writers, you will see that they are right-wing conservatives who go to international conferences on climate change to mock Greenpeace, among other things.

Our country seems politically divided on every issue, whether it's gun control or raising taxes to help our economy recover. But when political battles end in stalemate or the defeat of sensible initiatives such as taking steps to reduce greenhouse gases, truly, nobody wins.

When the April 25 op-ed refers to "James Hanson of NASA fame," claiming that he has found "no warming on a five-year moving average for the last 10 years," I believe the author means James Hansen, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies. According to Guzman, Hansen is "one of the most important voices in climate-change debates," now arguing for a world target carbon dioxide level in the atmosphere of 350 parts per million (ppm) rather than the 450 ppm previously considered acceptable (today's level is about 387 ppm). "The evidence Hansen observed," says Guzman ". . . was that ice sheets were melting faster than expected, glaciers were disappearing, coral reefs were suffering, and so on."

It is true that many details, such as how much greenhouse gases will affect global temperatures by the end of the century, are uncertain at this point. But it is false that scientists specializing in the physical world still have any doubts about climate change or its causes.

Guzman quotes Business Insider's 2009 list of the 10 best known experts on the subject — all scientists in oceanography, atmospheric chemistry, climate modeling, etc. — and the 10 best known "global warming skeptics."

The latter list includes only one climate scientist, Patrick Michaels (a member of the

libertarian Cato Institute) who “has received a great deal of money . . . from . . . the energy industry”; and nonscientists such as the late novelist Michael Crichton. One member of this list, political scientist Bjorn Lomborg has changed his mind “and now advocates spending \$100 billion a year to fight climate change.”

Guzman’s book addresses the impacts of global warming on human society rather than on wildlife and the natural environment. If we do not act now, he says, people in 2050 will face severe effects from accumulating greenhouse gases: “Countless millions will be displaced by rising seas; refugees around the world will be looking for places to live; food and water supplies will have failed in many parts of the world, triggering famine and humanitarian crises on a new and horrific scale; countries will be going to war over water and other resources necessary for survival; some states will dissolve into chaos, making them ideal places for terrorist organizations to operate; and human health around the world will be under attack from heat waves, water- and food-borne illnesses, and possibly major outbreaks of deadly contagious disease. . . . We must raise the price of carbon sufficiently to keep the planet from overheating. If we don’t, we will trigger human tragedy on a scale the world has never seen.”

Guzman carefully supports his conclusions with examples from Nigeria, the Middle East, Bolivia, Egypt, California, and other locations around the world.

I urge readers of all political views to get past the Ping-Pong stage and join together to consider the generations to come. If the size and complexity of the issue seems just too overwhelming to think about, I urge you to read Guzman’s book. It won’t help you sleep, but it might help us all wake up before it’s too late.