

The Australian



Glaciergate threatens a climate change

- Peter Wilson, Europe correspondent
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GRAHAM Cogley, the Canadian scientist who trekked a decade-old paper trail to expose the Glaciergate error in a crucial UN-backed document on climate change, says there is one certainty about what will happen next.

An expert on glaciers at Trent University in Ontario, Cogley is an instinctively cautious scientist who opposes any leaps to unproven conclusions but he is prepared to bet that climate change sceptics and deniers will pore over the report of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change more closely than ever to try to find more errors.

"Sceptics have already started using this incident for their own purposes by saying that somehow the whole IPCC document is now in doubt," he tells Focus in a telephone interview from Canada.

It was Cogley's meticulous attention to detail and his resistance to "sexing up" research that exposed the wildly exaggerated claim in the IPCC's most recent assessment of climate change that Himalayan glaciers were likely to melt away as soon as 2035.

"I'm confident that the document as a whole is authoritative and the reliance placed on it by policy makers is not misplaced but I suppose you always had to expect that people would try to use this to shoot down the overall evidence on climate change."

Fred Pearce, a British environmental journalist who has found himself at the centre of the Glaciergate row, agrees with Cogley's prediction and says the stakes are now dangerously high for Rajendra Pachauri, the head of the Nobel Prize-winning IPCC.

"People who want to undermine the science on climate change will be crawling over the report looking for another mistake like this and if they do find another one it will be curtains for Pachauri," Pearce says. "The way he has handled this glacier issue means he's now a sitting duck if anything else turns up."

Having accused the Indian government of peddling "voodoo science" when it criticised the IPCC's glacier claims, Pachauri this week was forced into a humiliating apology and admission that instead of being solid, peer-reviewed science the 2035 claim had actually been "cut and pasted" from a WWF (formerly world wildlife fund) campaign document that, in turn, was based on a single-source news article written by Pearce in 1999.

The offending paragraph in the IPCC's 2007 assessment declared that "glaciers in the Himalaya are receding faster than in any other part of the world and, if the present rate continues, the likelihood of them disappearing by the year 2035 and perhaps sooner is very high if the Earth keeps warming at the current rate".

Experts say the paragraph is unproven and it could take 300 years for those glaciers to melt.

An IPCC statement conceded this week the paragraph "refers to poorly substantiated estimates of rate of recession and date for the disappearance of Himalayan glaciers. In drafting the paragraph in question, the clear and well-established standards of evidence, required by the IPCC procedures, were not applied properly.

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"The IPCC regrets the poor application of well-established IPCC procedures in this instance."

The IPCC, which is charged with bringing together thousands of scientific viewpoints into one credible, shared assessment of climate science, stressed the error did not change its general understanding that the world's glaciers are rapidly melting.

It was just one paragraph in a 3000-page report, they argue, and it was not even reproduced in the more widely read summary for policy makers given to governments before Copenhagen.

In that way the Glaciergate affair resembled the leaking of emails from the University of East Anglia's climate-change unit last year, as the leaked emails contained no evidence that climate-change data had been falsified but they did raise questions about the professional conduct and impartiality of the scientists involved. Yvo de Boer, the head of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, conceded the glacier affair was especially damaging because it raised questions about how the voluminous IPCC assessments were put together.

"The credibility of the IPCC depends on the thoroughness with which its procedures are adhered to," he said. "The procedures have been violated in this case. That must not be allowed to happen again because the credibility of climate-change policy can only be based on credible science."

Despite their promises of transparency and stricter standards, IPCC officials have refused to name the author of the flawed paragraph and the lead author of the relevant section, Murari Lal, has not accepted any responsibility for the bungle.

Pearce, a freelance reporter for New Scientist and The Guardian, says the incident began in April 1999 when he noticed a report in the Indian magazine Down to Earth quoting an Indian glaciologist, Syed Hasnain, saying the Himalayan glaciers, which help to provide water to two billion people, could be gone by 2035.

The Indian magazine quoted Hasnain, who was then vice-chancellor of New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, as saying the grim prediction came from an academic paper he was about to present to a July 1999 academic conference in Birmingham.

"I decided to follow it up so I contacted Hasnain and he told me the same thing, which I reported a couple of months later in the New Scientist," Pearce says.

In 2005 the environmental group WWF used the 2035 warning from the New Scientist article in one of its campaign documents, which somehow became the source of the IPCC paragraph.

Last November, the Indian government released a discussion paper written by retired geologist Vijay Kumar Raina, which said while some Himalayan glaciers were retreating, there was "nothing to suggest as some have said that they will disappear".

Instead of re-examining the IPCC's position on the glaciers, Pachauri brushed off the Indian report as "voodoo science", saying that "this guy retired years ago and I find it totally baffling that he comes out and throws out everything that has been established years ago".

The journal Science published a news report on Raina's paper in November and academic Jeffrey S. Kargel of the University of Arizona brought it to the attention of Cogley and some other glacier experts. "That's when I started trying to work out the paper trail to find out where this 2035 date had come from," Cogley tells Focus.

"Those glaciers are quite likely losing mass faster now than they were a few decades ago and that is consistent with the acceleration of global warming, but a date as early as 2035 was . . . unsustainable.

"There seemed to be some internal political dispute going on among Indian scientists so I wanted to see exactly what it was that Hasnain had said in his original paper back in 1999."

The sponsors of the Birmingham conference, the International Commission on Snow and Ice, had never published
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Hasnain's paper but Cogley knew Georg Kaser, an Austrian glaciologist who had chaired the conference.

"Georg had kept a copy of the paper so I started bugging him to dig it out . . . It turned out that Hasnain had not included any dates at all about the glaciers disappearing, it was all a red herring."

Hasnain told reporters this week that he never put any dates on the melting, claiming he was misquoted by Pearce. Pearce is adamant he reported the scientist's comments accurately, noting the Indian magazine had carried similar quotes.

"But the issue is not what Hasnain said and did," Pearce says. "It is about the IPCC screwing up its report. It is scandalous for them to be just cutting and pasting stuff into their reports."

"I always thought the 2035 date was dodgy but I even used it again in another story last year because it had been in the IPCC report so I assumed they had verified it. I couldn't believe it when Cogley found I was the original source."

Pearce reported on the tale of the 2035 prediction in New Scientist last week and it was picked up by British newspaper the The Sunday Times and The Australian.

Patrick Michaels, a global warming sceptic from US libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, is now calling for Pachauri to resign as IPCC chief. "I'd like to know how such an absurd statement made it through the review process," Michaels says.

Bob Ward, a geologist and former journalist who has published academic papers on the misrepresentation of climate-change evidence by environmentalists and climate-change sceptics, says the Cato Institute's response is predictable. "People who have an axe to grind are trying to use this incident to undermine the credibility of the whole IPCC," he says.

"But in order to do that you have to enormously exaggerate the significance of the paragraph about the Himalayas," says Ward, who is now policy director at the London School of Economics' Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change.

"We are talking about one error in a three-year-old 3000-page report that was clearly a rather glaring mistake. Groups who don't want to see any action on climate change are using anything like this they can get their hands on to try to undermine the science. It is happening particularly in Australia and the US where there are political debates going on about domestic legislation related to climate change."

"Cogley exposed this 2035 date as inaccurate not because he disputes the fact that glaciers are receding -- he doesn't -- but because he genuinely wants all the science to be as accurate as possible. But a lot of the people who are leaping on to it just want to raise as many doubts as possible to try to slow the whole process down."

According to Ward, the most concerted opposition to climate-change action "is coming from ideologically driven right-wing groups like the American think tanks that oppose any sort of restrictions on the market" and fossil fuel companies "that are trying to delay any new restrictions on their business for as long as possible".

"It is very similar to the way the tobacco industry managed to delay health regulations for years by playing up any element of doubt at all about the medical research on smoking. That is why it's so dangerous and so stupid for the IPCC to let mistakes like this happen."

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