

The Volokh Conspiracy

- Home
 - About
 - E-Mail Policy
 - Linking Policy
 - Stuff
 - Who Are We?
 - Search
 - Subscribe
 - Twitter
 - RSS
 - Blogroll
 - Archives
-

The IPCC Under Siege

Jonathan H. Adler • January 31, 2010 11:06 am

2010 has not been kind to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This U.N. sanctioned body is supposed to issue periodic reports that summarize the state of the science of global climate change based upon a comprehensive review and synthesis of the relevant peer-reviewed scientific literature. In the past few weeks, however, it has been revealed that the IPCC's 2007 Working Group II report on "Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability" contains claims about the projected impacts of climate change that are completely unfounded, based upon non-scientific (let alone peer reviewed) sources, or misrepresent the underlying scientific literature.

The first revelation was that there was no scientific basis for the IPCC's widely-hyped claim that Himalayan glaciers could disappear by 2035. This projection is off by a few *centuries*, at best. When an Indian climate researcher first challenged this claim, suggesting there is no evidence (yet) of warming-induced glacial retreat in the Himalayas, IPCC chief Rajendra Pachauri was dismissive. Now, however, he's changed his tune, and the IPCC has acknowledged the error. This was more than a simple mistake, however, as it appears the IPCC was informed of the error before the report was finalized, but failed to make any changes, nor was Pachauri quick to acknowledge the error once it was brought to his attention.

It has also become clear that the IPCC report systematically misrepresents the peer-reviewed literature on the effect of climate change hurricanes and natural disasters. Specifically, the report falsely claims there is evidence that human-induced climate change is producing an increase in extreme weather events and associated losses and includes a graph that is not based upon published, peer-reviewed work. Yet the studies upon which the IPCC purports to base its claim — including one that was not peer-reviewed and should not have been cited at all — say no such thing. Worse, when the IPCC's erroneous claims were challenged during the review process, an IPCC author

fabricated a response to defend the erroneous claim. In response, the IPCC now claims it “carefully followed” its official procedures. Yet as Roger Pielke Jr., one of the researchers whose work is misrepresented in the report, responds, this claim is simply false as the IPCC “relied on an unpublished, non-peer reviewed source to produce its top line conclusions in this section,” ignored the complaints of reviewers, and fabricated a defense of the claim. Indeed, when the then-unpublished, un-peer-reviewed paper upon which the IPCC purported to rely was eventually published, it rejected the climate-disaster loss link asserted by the IPCC.

But wait, there’s more. It turns out that other claims in the IPCC’s WGII report were also based upon non-scientific sources, including magazine articles and reports by advocacy groups. For instance, the IPCC’s claim that climate change could endanger up to 40 percent of the Amazonian rain forest is based upon a report issued by an environmental advocacy organization, not a peer-reviewed scientific study, and the advocacy report misrepresented peer-reviewed studies to reach its conclusion. It also appears other IPCC claims about glaciers in the Andes and Alps were based upon a magazine article and student’s dissertation.

What’s interesting is that all of these errors are in the WG II report — the report that is supposed to highlight the practical effects of a gradually warming climate — as opposed to the WG I report, which focuses on the underlying scientific evidence that increases in greenhouse gas emissions are contributing to climate change. For this reason, these revelations do not dissuade me that human activity is likely contributing to atmospheric warming. But it does provide further evidence that many scientists have adopted an unscientific, advocacy stance in which they seek to convince the public that there is incontrovertible proof of an impending climatic disaster so as to build the case for drastic action. This problem is actually exacerbated by the IPCC process, which seeks to formulate an “official,” government-approved, scientific “consensus,” as I explained here.

Climate change is a serious concern, even if it does not threaten to eradicate Himalayan glaciers in my lifetime or wipe coastal cities off the map. If we are to have a serious and honest debate about climate policy, we have to have more honest and responsible conduct by climate scientists. While ClimateGate and the above-mentioned IPCC errors may have been the work of only a handful of climate scientists, unless the climate science community does a better job of policing its own, and accomodating legitimate dissenting views, it will become increasingly unable to inform and enlighten the policy debate.

UPDATE: In the comment thread to a prior post, some asked why I still believe in anthropogenic global warming, and support certain climate policy measures, after repeated instances of misconduct by climate scientists. Given the thrust of many comments below, I thought I’d restate my answer here:

My belief that human activity is contributing to climatic warming is based upon my understanding of the accumulated scientific evidence about how our climate works and the effect of increasing contributions of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere that I have reviewed and considered over the past 15-plus years during which I’ve been following and often working on this issue, including the nine years I spent at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, during which time I edited this book on climate change policy and authored a 1998 *National Review* cover story on how many risks of climate change are

overstated. Much of the relevant scientific research is summarized (if occasionally exaggerated) in the IPCC's Working Group I report on the basic science of warming (which is a separate report from the Working Group II report on impacts, some claims from which are unfounded and/or not properly cited).

Most so-called "skeptics" within the scientific community also accept the basic claims about the likely anticipated effect of anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases. The primary areas of disagreement are over the nature and extent of various feedback mechanisms in the climate which could augment or dampen greenhouse warming and the practical effects of climatic warming. So, for instance, noted climate skeptics Patrick Michaels and Robert Balling Jr. write in their recent book for the Cato Institute, *Climate of Extremes: The Global Warming Science They Don't Want You to Know*, that there is a warming trend and that human activity shares some of the blame. As they summarize on page 27: "AGW (anthropogenic global warming), yes. But DAGW [dangerous anthropogenic global warming]? We think not!"

I believe that certain policy responses are justified because even if one accepts a fairly "skeptical" view of the science, the best estimate is that human activity will produce some warming that will have deleterious effects in some parts of the globe, particularly in areas that have not done much to contribute to the warming. As I explain in this paper (and in shorter pieces here, here, and here), these effects should be sufficient to justify a policy response, particularly if one believes in the importance of property rights, as I do. I also believe that taxes on consumption, including energy consumption, are preferable to taxes on income, and so would welcome a revenue-neutral carbon tax.

Categories: Climate Change, Politicizing Science

74 Comments

1. **Abdul Abulbul Amir says:**

The bottom line is that the IPCC has been doing something other than science. It is possible that something that organization has published is true. However, everything that organization has published lacks credibility.

Quote

January 31, 2010, 11:24 am

2. **road2serfdom says:**

I went to dinner once and saw the cook not wash his hands after using the bathroom. I will never eat dinner there again. Of course, I still eat lunch there as my prior belief that he washes his hands during lunchtime hours has yet be disproven.

Quote

January 31, 2010, 11:37 am

3. **The Colonel says:**

What evidence is required for the chattering classes to actually call the