

Warming

Nick Hylla

GLTPA

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Let me start by stating that, as an educator, I do not normally talk (or write) about global climate change. So why then did I choose it as a topic this month? It is my contention that we can learn more about ourselves through the global warming debate than we can about the climate itself. I hope to prove that in this article.

First, let's talk about the difficulties of discussing global warming. As I see it, the issue is complicated by the following characteristics:

- **It is complex (very complex).** By my estimation, a person would have to understand at least 10 processes to form a basic understanding of global climate change: 1) Milankovitch cycles, 2) the carbon cycle, 3) geologic fossil fuel deposition, 4) global fossil fuel extraction and consumption, 5) the greenhouse effect, 6) carbon sequestration, 7) carbon dating, 8) scientific peer review, 9) statistics, 10) environmental economics, etc.
- **It is abstract.** The debate centers on periods of time that span from the hundreds to hundreds of thousands of years. It is difficult for us to form a concrete understanding of time in this way. We have no individual experience with it.
- **It has economic consequence for people in power.** CO₂ is not a traditional pollutant. It is not solved with a smokestack scrubber. It is a fundamental byproduct of an energy intensive economic system. There are people that derive great benefit (and power) from the system. And, there are millions of people that live in dependence with it and are unaware or mistrusting of alternatives.
- **It has no direct effect on me personally.** CO₂ is not an acute toxin. The weather has always been unpredictable. Climate change is a slow process. Just try and prove to a person that a warm (or cold, dry, wet) day is the result of global warming.

All of these factors increase the potential of an issue to be politicized. And, there is one thing that we can all agree on about global warming: it is politicized. This decreases the educational value of the issue, and from my experience, eliminates it as a learning opportunity for children, teachers, landowners, the general public, etc. (thus, I tend not to talk about it).

What does it mean for an issue to be politicized? It means that special interests exert influence over public understanding to achieve goals that are beneficial to them. They create misinformation and confusion, and promote emotional responses over rational actions. This occurs in disregard of the state of knowledge on the issue.

It is fairly easy to recognize global warming propaganda. This is because most propaganda techniques are the same today as they were 100 years ago. Three techniques can easily be recognized in the global warming “debate”:

- **The Fear Factor.** Fear is a powerful emotional response that can overpower reason and lead to irrational acts. There are few better examples of using fear to modify behavior than the movie “The Day After Tomorrow” which shows nations devastated by the most freakish tidal waves and winter storms imaginable. This tactic is also used in Al Gore’s movie “An Inconvenient Truth” as he has us imagine large, devastating hurricanes powered by warming seas. Though the science about this correlation is weak, he did not hesitate to put a hurricane on the DVD cover.
- **Expert Substitution.** This is a bait and switch technique that plays off of our identification with role-models. In the case of global warming, Michael Crichton, famous author and global warming skeptic, has been brought forward numerous times on television and radio as an expert on the subject. He is often believed, in spite of the fact that his opinions stand at odds with 1,000 of the world’s top climate scientists that continue research and debate as part of the International Panel on Climate Change.
- **The Straw Man.** Define your opposition so that you can easily prove them wrong. You create a feeble argument and then tear it apart. Or you create a despicable caricature and use it to demonize a group of people (the global warming straw man is often the radical-idealist-fringe-eco-terrorist who loves Hollywood and hates America). In recent years, this technique has defined the cable news format, whose commentators even employ it with a guest sitting right next to them. They’ll define their guest beforehand, and once they appear in person, they’ll talk over, misrepresent, and derail to ensure that the guest cannot sufficiently explain their point of view. By creating and maintaining opposition, this technique stalls progress and helps maintain the status quo.

To dismantle the propaganda and understand the agenda, it is helpful to ask “Who benefits?” It is not my intent to tackle this question, but there is at least one irony in the answer.

The irony is that the forest industry stands to benefit more than any other sector from the actions proposed to mediate atmospheric CO₂. Yet, in my experience, I have seen little evidence that this avenue is being pursued.

Trees are a renewable resource. They capture and store carbon from the atmosphere. Wood fuel is carbon neutral. The manufacture and use of wood products uses less energy and produces less CO₂ than concrete and steel. Forests are carbon sinks and they reduce surface temperatures. One need only look at the wood products market in Europe (especially for wood pellets) to see that conservation incentives and carbon trading have been both a boon to the wood products industry and an effective incentive to keep land forested.

So, my point is that the forestry community should get over the “us versus them” and “my way or the highway” attitude on global warming. We should look forward to a real debate and the opportunities it would bring. My guess is we can come to mutual agreement if we just start warming up to one another.

For questions, comments, or suggestions contact Nick Hylla at nick@wfrea.org or 715-295-0458.