

Newsletter Opinion
on
Global Warming

My father was a geomorphologist – a scientist who studied the shape of the landscape and how it came to be the way it is.

We lived on the northern outskirts of London, a region lined with hills and ridges: Mill Hill, Harrow-on-the-Hill, High Barnet, Highgate Hill, Hampstead Heath, Dollis Hill, and so on. My father explained to us that these hills were rather special: they are “terminal moraines” - that is the débris an ice sheet deposits at its melting edge. Most of Britain right down to north London was covered by ice thousands of feet thick, just 24,000 years ago.

With the disappearance of the massive weight of ice, Britain is slowly tilting like a see-saw. The Highlands of Scotland are rising higher. The south east of England is sinking closer to sea level. On the other side of the English Channel, it affects the Dutch too. They, for centuries, have been raising dykes and pumping water to protect their land as it sinks slowly below sea level. On the other end of the see-saw, the Scots could be forgiven for thinking that the sea is receding.

In 1955 Bond senior took me to see the largest glacier in Switzerland, the Aletsch. It has been retreating up its valley for the last 12,000 years. As we walked up the valley he pointed out the traces the glacier had left in earlier times. We found its moraine deposited in 1870. But we had to walk a mile up the valley to find the melting edge of the ice that year (1955). Today, some 50 years later, the end of the Aletsch is a further mile up the valley.

I grew up, then, with the idea that our climate has been warming for thousands of years and is likely to warm for many thousands of years yet. I thought everybody knew this, so it came as a surprise to me that the general population is only now discovering this phenomenon.

This is largely thanks to the Global Warming hair-shirt obsessives who want us to believe that humans can do something to stop it happening.

What about the much publicized Intergovernmental Report produced by a panel of experts (Ref.ⁱ), “who, you all know, are honorable men”? This is where the humbug comes in.

They say, quite rightly that the earth’s climate is warming up. But who are we to question them when they claim that it is due to human activity – for they are honorable men. They say that we should reduce emissions of greenhouse gases – for they are honorable men. Yet they admit that even if we stopped right now, the climate will continue to heat up for centuries – so they are honorable men.

They say that extremes of climate will be more frequent, that crops will suffer, that water will be scarcer, that coastal plains will be flooded, that winds will blow and crack their cheeks, that cataracts and hurricanes will spout and drench our steeples, and that all-shaking thunder, will smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world.

They say that this will happen whatever we do, just a little sooner if we do nothing. But they are only looking at carbon emissions. They mention, but then remain silent on another greenhouse gas that is 20 times more potent than CO₂: methane. They are silent because the one factor we have control over is taboo: it would mean cutting right back on beef and dairy herds. Cattle belch pints of methane with every mouthful of cud.

They remain silent on a whole range of other possible measures. One that is dear to my own heart is overpopulation. Already humans have an overwhelming impact on the Earth's ecosystem (See "Humans consume a quarter of Earth's natural productivity", page 3).

Rather than trying to stabilize (just "stabilize" mark you) carbon levels by 2100, how about a program to reduce the world's population to 10% of its current level?

Wouldn't that be wonderful? Suddenly the human footprint on the planet would become sustainable. There would be enough resources for everyone, we could all enjoy a high standard of living – and greenhouse gas emissions would be 10% of what they are now!

There are good reasons for conserving carbon resources, but halting global warming is as futile as Canute turning the tide. Rather, we should throw our energies into protecting ourselves from the consequences.