

The gods are laughing

Scientists who work in the fields liberal arts graduate Al Gore wanders through contradict his theories about man-induced climate change

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Albert Einstein once said, "Whoever undertakes to set himself up as a judge of truth and knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods."

While the gods must consider An Inconvenient Truth the ultimate comedy, real climate scientists are crying over Al Gore's new film. This is not just because the ex-vice-president commits numerous basic science mistakes. They are also concerned that many in the media and public will fail to realize that this film amounts to little more than science fiction.



CREDIT: Shannon Stapleton, Reuters
Al Gore lectures...

Gore's credibility is damaged early in the film when he tells the audience that, by simply looking at Antarctic ice cores with the naked eye, one can see when the American Clean Air Act was passed. Dr. Ian Clark, professor of Earth Sciences at the University of Ottawa (U of O) responds, "This is pure fantasy unless the reporter is able to detect parts per billion changes to chemicals in ice." Air over the United States doesn't even circulate to the Antarctic before mixing with most of the northern, then the southern, hemisphere air, and this process takes decades. Clark explains that even far more significant events, such as the settling of dust arising from the scouring of continental shelves at the end of ice ages, are undetectable in ice cores by an untrained eye.

Gore repeatedly labels carbon dioxide as "global warming pollution" when, in reality, it is no more pollution than is oxygen. CO₂ is plant food, an ingredient essential for photosynthesis without which Earth would be a lifeless, frozen ice ball. The hypothesis that human release of CO₂ is a major contributor to global warming is just that -- an unproven hypothesis, against which evidence is increasingly mounting.

In fact, the correlation between CO₂ and temperature that Gore speaks about so confidently is simply non-existent over all meaningful time scales. U of O climate researcher Professor Jan Veizer demonstrated that, over geologic time, the two are not linked at all. Over the intermediate time scales Gore focuses on, the ice cores show that CO₂ increases don't precede, and therefore don't cause, warming. Rather, they follow temperature rise -- by as much as 800 years. Even in the past century, the correlation is poor; the planet actually cooled between 1940 and 1980, when human emissions of CO₂ were rising at the fastest rate in our history.

Similarly, the fact that water vapour constitutes 95% of greenhouse gases by volume

is conveniently ignored by Gore. While humanity's three billion tonnes (gigatonnes, or GT) per year net contribution to the atmosphere's CO2 load appears large on a human scale, it is actually less than half of 1% of the atmosphere's total CO2 content (750-830 GT). The CO2 emissions of our civilization are also dwarfed by the 210 GT/year emissions of the gas from Earth's oceans and land. Perhaps even more significant is the fact that the uncertainty in the measurement of atmospheric CO2 content is 80 GT -- making three GT seem hardly worth mentioning.

But Gore persists, labeling future CO2 rises as "deeply unethical" and lectures the audience, "Each one of us is a cause of global warming." Not satisfied with simply warning of human-induced killer heat waves -- events in Europe this past year were "like a nature hike through the Book of Revelations," he says -- he then uses high-tech special effects to show how human-caused climate changes are causing more hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, floods, infectious diseases, insect plagues, glacial retreats, coral die-outs and the flooding of small island nations due to sea level rise caused by the melting of the polar caps. One is left wondering if Gore thinks nature is responsible for anything.

Scientists who actually work in these fields flatly contradict Gore. Take his allegations that extreme weather (EW) events will increase in frequency and severity as the world warms and that this is already happening. Former professor of climatology at the University of Winnipeg Dr. Tim Ball notes, "The theories that Gore supports indicate the greatest warming will be in polar regions. Therefore, the temperature contrast with warmer regions -- the driver of extreme weather -- will lessen and, with it, storm potential will lessen."

This is exactly what former Environment Canada research scientist and EW specialist Dr. Madhav Khandekar found. His studies show there has been no increase in EW events in Canada in the past 25 years. Furthermore, he sees no indication that such events will increase over the next 25 years. "In fact, some EW events such as winter blizzards have definitely declined," Khandekar says. "Prairie droughts have been occurring for hundreds of years. The 13th and 16th century saw some of the severest and longest droughts ever on Canadian/American prairies." Like many other researchers, Khandekar is convinced that EW is not increasing globally, either.

On hurricanes, Gore implies that new records are being set as a result of human greenhouse gas emissions. Besides clumsy errors in the presentation of the facts (Katrina did not get "stronger and stronger and stronger" as it came over the Gulf of Mexico; rather, it was category 5 over the ocean and was downgraded to category 3 when it made a landfall), Gore fails to note that the only region to show an increase in hurricanes in recent years is the North Atlantic. Hurricane specialist Tad Murty, former senior research scientist Department of Fisheries and Oceans and now adjunct professor of Earth sciences at U of O, points out, "In all other six ocean basins where tropical cyclones occur, there is either a flat or a downward trend." Murty lists 1900, 1926 and 1935 as the years in which the most intense hurricanes were recorded in the United States. In fact, Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Center in Miami, has stated that global warming has nothing to do with the recent increase in hurricane frequency in the North Atlantic. Murty concludes, "The feeling among many meteorologists is that it has to do with the North Atlantic oscillation, which is now in the positive phase and will continue for another decade or so."

In their open letter to the Prime Minister in April, 61 of the world's leading experts modestly expressed their understanding of the science: "The study of global climate change is an 'emerging science,' one that is perhaps the most complex ever tackled. It may be many years yet before we properly understand the Earth's climate system." It seems that liberal arts graduate Al Gore, political champion of the Kyoto Protocol, thinks he knows better.

Institut Pasteur (Paris) Professor Paul Reiter seemed to sum up the sentiments of many experts when he labelled the film "pure, mind-bending propaganda." Such

reactions should certainly cause Canadians to wonder if Nobel Prize-winning French novelist Andre Gide had a point when he advised, "Believe those who are seeking the truth; doubt those who find it."

- Tom Harris is a mechanical engineer and Ottawa director of High Park Group, a public affairs and public policy company.

SEA LEVEL FALLING, POLAR BEARS STABLE, ICE CAPS THICKENING ...

"I can assure Mr. Gore that no one from the South Pacific islands has fled to New Zealand because of rising seas. In fact, if Gore consults the data, he will see it shows sea level falling in some parts of the Pacific." -- Dr. Chris de Freitas, climate scientist, associate professor, University of Auckland, N.Z.

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"We find no alarming sea level rise going on, in the Maldives, Tovalu, Venice, the Persian Gulf and even satellite altimetry, if applied properly." -- Dr. Nils-Axel Morner, emeritus professor of paleogeophysics and geodynamics, Stockholm University, Sweden.

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"Gore is completely wrong here -- malaria has been documented at an altitude of 2,500 metres -- Nairobi and Harare are at altitudes of about 1,500 metres. The new altitudes of malaria are lower than those recorded 100 years ago. None of the "30 so-called new diseases" Gore references are attributable to global warming, none." -- Dr. Paul Reiter, professor, Institut Pasteur, unit of insects and infectious diseases, Paris, comments on Gore's belief that Nairobi and Harare were founded just above the mosquito line to avoid malaria and how the mosquitoes are now moving to higher altitudes.

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"Our information is that seven of 13 populations of polar bears in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago (more than half the world's estimated total) are either stable or increasing.... Of the three that appear to be declining, only one has been shown to be affected by climate change. No one can say with certainty that climate change has not affected these other populations, but it is also true that we have no information to suggest that it has." -- Dr. Mitchell Taylor, manager, wildlife research section, Department of Environment, Igloodik, Nunavut.

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"Mr. Gore suggests that the Greenland melt area increased considerably between 1992 and 2005. But 1992 was exceptionally cold in Greenland and the melt area of ice sheet was exceptionally low due to the cooling caused by volcanic dust emitted from Mt. Pinatubo. If, instead of 1992, Gore had chosen for comparison the year 1991, one in which the melt area was 1% higher than in 2005, he would have to conclude that the ice sheet melt area is shrinking and that perhaps a new Ice Age is just around the corner." -- Dr. Petr Chylek, adjunct professor, Department of Physics and Atmospheric Science, Dalhousie University, Halifax.

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"The oceans are now heading into one of their periodic phases of cooling.... Modest changes in temperature are not about to wipe them [coral] out. Neither will increased carbon dioxide, which is a fundamental chemical building block that allows coral reefs

to exist at all." -- Dr. Gary D. Sharp, Center for Climate/Ocean Resources Study, Salinas, Calif.

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"Both the Antarctic and Greenland ice caps are thickening. The temperature at the South Pole has declined by more than one degree C since 1950. And the area of sea ice around the continent has increased over the last 20 years." -- Dr. R.M. Carter, professor, Marine Geophysical Laboratory, James Cook University, Townsville, Australia.

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"From data published by the Canadian Ice Service, there has been no precipitous drop-off in the amount or thickness of the ice cap since 1970 when reliable overall coverage became available for the Canadian Arctic." -- Dr./Cdr. M.R. Morgan, FRMS, formerly advisor to the World Meteorological Organization/climatology research scientist at University of Exeter, U.K.

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"The MPB (mountain pine beetle) is a species native to this part of North America and is always present. The MPB epidemic started as comparatively small outbreaks and through forest management inaction got completely out of hand." -- Rob Scagel, M.Sc., forest microclimate specialist, Pacific Phytometric Consultants, Surrey, B.C., comments on Gore's belief that the mountain pine beetle is an "invasive exotic species" that has become a plague due to fewer days of frost.

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