The Complex Realities Behind Global Warming

Dr. Ray Bohlin says that global warming is over-hyped and not the danger that environmental alarmists would have us believe. We need to look carefully at what's really going on.

Is the Earth Warming?

Global warming is a very controversial and complicated topic. A few years ago I addressed my growing concerns about how certain scientists and the media were only telling part of the story.{1} I have hesitated to go further with a critique with what has become a global warming scare campaign because I wanted to be sure before getting overly critical.

Unfortunately, because of controversies over origins, embryonic stem cell research, the lack of solid information about sexually transmitted diseases for young people, and other issues, the Christian community has been given a tag of being anti-science. We are somehow afraid of science because it has the potential of arguing against the idea of a truly supernatural God.

As one trained in the disciplines of science, this reputation grieves me. I love science and nature. I always have. I studied ecology as an undergraduate and early in my graduate studies. I was a member of SECS, Students for Environmental Concerns, at the University of Illinois. I recycle my newspapers, plastic, aluminum, and tin cans and glass. I have always driven a fuel efficient vehicle.

As I grew as a believer I read Francis Schaeffer's *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology.* In those pages, I saw that only a Christian environmental ethic could supply a real and workable framework for environmental action

while still respecting man’s unique position as being made in the image of God and man’s place as God’s steward of Creation. One time I even represented evangelical Christians on a panel at a meeting of environmental journalists. They were genuinely cordial and very curious about how a conservative evangelical could even have concerns about the environment.

But I could still find many points of agreement with the more secular environmental movement. Therefore, I have hesitated to criticize what has become a primary issue for the environmental movement until I was more up to date on the facts. My basic point about global warming is that there is much more controversy about what the data is telling us than what is usually communicated to the public.

The one thing just about everybody agrees with is that the earth has warmed about one degree Fahrenheit or a half degree Celsius since 1900. The controversy revolves around what has caused that increase, what its effects will be, and whether the steep increase in global temperature, especially since the 1970s, will continue to escalate out of control.

But is it realistic to think such escalation will continue? Does the data really predict such an extreme? Can computer models be that accurate?

If the Earth Is Warming, Are Humans Responsible?

As I noted above, just about everyone is convinced the earth has warmed by about one degree Fahrenheit since the year 1900. That doesn’t sound particularly ominous. But some computer models suggest that global temperatures could increase by five to ten degrees Celsius or nine to eighteen degrees Fahrenheit by the year 2100!

That sounds like a very unattractive possibility. But is it

real? The engine that really drives the global warming freight train is not just the fact that the earth has warmed over the last century but the suspected cause. Those who support a radical view of global warming, such as former Vice President Al Gore, believe that the warming is due to increased levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The increase in carbon dioxide is caused by humans burning too many fossil fuels such as oil, gas, and coal.

So how much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is too much? In 1958, carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere were 315 parts per million (ppm). In 2008, fifty years later, carbon dioxide had risen to 385 ppm, about a twenty percent increase. Carbon dioxide is referred to as a greenhouse gas. That means that the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere absorbs energy from the sun and radiates it back out as heat. Therefore, the more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the warmer it becomes.

That would seem to say that increased carbon dioxide means a warmer atmosphere. But how much heat carbon dioxide accounts for is hotly debated among scientists. Some say it's the major cause of global warming; others say it probably has little effect. There has been a little reporting that the earth cooled slightly after 1998, and that the earth's temperature has stabilized for the last ten years. In fact, from January 2007 to May 2008, the earth cooled by a full degree Fahrenheit.{2} Yet, CO_2 levels have continued to rise! Something seems backwards.

Australian climate scientist David Evans used to solidly believe that there was a large role for carbon dioxide in the global warming scenario. But Evans then looked at the data independently. He summed up his research by saying, "There is no evidence to support the idea that carbon emissions cause significant global warming. None."{3} The data has completely changed his mind.

Besides, the earth has warmed and cooled significantly in the

last two thousand years without any human interference.{4} The Medieval Warming Period from AD 900 to AD 1300 was warmer than today (which, incidentally, was a period of great economic expansion, demonstrating that the alarmist claims that global warming will ruin the economy are groundless).

If the Earth Is Warming, What Will Be the Consequences?

As I have said earlier, the earth has warmed slightly over the last century. Some have even pointed to 1998 as the warmest year on record. Although a re-analysis of the data questions that conclusion, the 1990s was still a very warm decade compared to any other decade in the century.

But what if the temperatures continue to rise? Perhaps the most common projection is of wildly rising sea levels. The 2001 IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report suggested sea levels could rise as much as two to three feet by the year 2100. Many of our coastal cities and wetlands would be inundated.

But what does the data show? First, sea levels have been rising steadily since the last ice age over eleven thousand years ago. The melting of the vast continental glaciers caused significant sea level increases. Second, over the last hundred and fifty years, sea levels have increased by about six inches every one hundred years. Third, many scientists see no reason that this rate will change significantly this century or the next. Reports of Indian Ocean or Pacific Ocean islands being inundated by rising sea levels just don’t stand up to investigation.

Venice has been succumbing to rising sea levels for over a hundred years. But the problem is not just rising sea levels.{5} The land mass that the city of Venice rests on has also been sinking for decades due the weight of the city and

the unstable ground underneath.

Many glaciers are retreating, and that could cause sea levels to rise. But some glaciers are growing and advancing. While one portion of Antarctica has warmed, most of the continent is cooling and the ice mass is growing. The realities are more complex that we are being told.

Another major projection is that storms will be increasing in frequency and intensity. This has usually been applied to hurricanes, especially after the destructive storms, Katrina and Rita, in 2005. But again something curious went underreported. Hurricane forecasters were predicting another harsh hurricane season in 2006 and 2007.

But neither of these years panned out that way. Both were relatively quiet with fewer and less intense storms. The peer reviewed journal *Natural Hazards* focused an entire issue on this question in 2003, and experts from across the climate fields found no reason to expect storms of any variety to increase in intensity or frequency.{6}

There are also positive benefits of warming and increased carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide and increasing temperatures are good for plants. Vegetation has increased by six percent globally from 1982 to 1999. We forget that carbon dioxide is not a pollutant. It is a necessary fertilizer for plants.

If the Earth Is Warming, What Should We Do About It?

Because of all this, I conclude that, at the very least, the evidence for anything resembling a catastrophic global warming due the increase of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels is remote at best. Certainly the earth is warming, but at a very slow rate. The warming is likely due to a well observed cycle of warming and cooling that occurs about

every fifteen hundred years.{7} This cyclical trend is probably due to cycles in the sun's intensity over this same period of time.

But those who are pushing a more alarming scenario of catastrophic global warming demand drastic action. Since many have concluded that the major component to the warming has been human produced carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels, they unsurprisingly want to curtail the use of fossil fuel. The now infamous Kyoto Protocol has called on the major developed countries to curtail their carbon emissions due to fossil fuels to seven percent below 1990 levels by the year 2010, only two years away. But increasing levels of technology have increased our demand for electricity. This means we would need to reduce our emissions by twenty-three percent of today's levels.{8} Needless to say, cutting our fossil fuel use by nearly one quarter would be catastrophic to our economy.

Renewable energy sources like wind and solar should be a part of our energy future, but they will always be intermittent. Storing and transporting these energy sources will continue to be expensive. Current costs indicate these power sources are four to ten times as expensive as fossil fuels.

Economic forecasting groups estimate that Kyoto will cost the U.S. economy between 200 and 300 billion dollars per year. Over two million jobs will disappear and the average household will lose $2,700 each year.{9} These enormous economic costs will be hardly noticed in households making six figure salaries. The largest impact of increasing energy costs will be largely felt by low and middle income families. The combined costs of electricity and gasoline will drive even more below the poverty line and force small businesses into bankruptcy.

The worst part of this economic news is that the actual gain in lowered global temperatures will be hardly noticeable. The

U.N. itself admits that even full compliance with Kyoto will only result in a 0.2 degree Centigrade slowing of global warming by 2047.

There are numerous other scientific, economic, and political problems with alarming scenarios of human caused global warming. Check the additional resources at the end of this article to get better informed about this crucial issue.

What Is a Christian Environmental Ethic?

To summarize: First, the likelihood that the increasing levels of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels is responsible for this warming is very small and growing smaller. Second, the evidence is increasing that this period of warming is not unusual in the earth's history. Third, the warming trend has stalled over the last decade as carbon dioxide levels have continued to increase. Fourth, even if the burning of fossil fuels has contributed significantly to this one-hundred-year warming trend, the proposed remedy of cutting back drastically on our use of fossil fuels would cost hundreds of billions of dollars every year and dramatically affect the worldwide economy and trap even more people in poverty for little or no reduction in the rate of warming.

And last but not least, over 30,000 scientists, 9,000 of them with Ph.D.s, have signed a statement rejecting the claim that "human release of greenhouse gases is damaging our climate."{10} There is no consensus in the scientific community about human-caused global warming.

I have a growing suspicion that global warming alarmism is simply a tool to bring about a redistribution of wealth from rich to poor countries, gain higher levels of government regulation, energize and empower the extreme environmental movement, and to impose an unnecessary lifestyle designed to drastically reduce the impact of humanity on the earth.

What this perspective reveals is an environmental policy based on a naturalistic worldview. The earth is viewed as a place where all manner of species have evolved through natural process and no one species has preference over another. The earth "belongs" to all species. Humans, therefore, are just another species, whose negative impact on the earth far outweighs its presence or numbers. Correcting this imbalance vetoes any concerns about human welfare and prosperity.

But from a Christian worldview, we learn that the earth belongs to God as Creator, and by His decree we have been given stewardship of this creation. But as human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, human welfare arises as an equally valid priority. We can't callously disregard the poor and human welfare in general to satisfy a politically motivated call for environmental action based on skewed science. Check the additional resources below to help you find your way through the minefield of conflicting evidence, rhetoric, and opinion.

Notes

1. Dr. Ray Bohlin, "Global Warming," probe.org/global-warming/.
2. wattsupwiththat.wordpress.com/2008/06/03/uah-global-temperature-dives-in-may/ accessed September 12, 2008.
3. David Evans, www.theaustralian.news.com.aU/storv/Q.25197.24036736-7583.00.html accessed September 3, 2008.
4. On top of that, ice core data from various places around the world now confirm that carbon dioxide levels have risen as the temperature rises well before humans could have had any worldwide impact. More precise measurements indicate that the rise in carbon dioxide trails the rise in temperatures by several hundred years. Climate specialists speculate that as the atmosphere and oceans increase in temperature, the oceans release more of their dissolved carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. So in the past, rising temperatures has caused the

rise in carbon dioxide, not the other way around.
5. Ibid, p. 161-171.
6. Natural Hazards 29, No. 2 (June 2003).
7. S. Fred Singer and Dennis T. Avery, Unstoppable Global Warming (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).
8. Ibid., 60.
9. Acton Institute, Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition (Grand Rapids, Mich./Acton Institute, 2007), 92-93.
10. Melinda Zosh, "31,000 Signatures Prove 'No Consensus' About Global Warming," Accuracy in Media, www.aim.org/briefing/31000-signatures-prove-no-consensus-about-global-warming/. May 22, 2008.

Additional Resources

www.cornwallalliance.org/articles/read/an-open-letter-to-the-signers-of-climate-change-an-evangelical-call-to-action-and-others-concerned-about-global-warming/

www.cornwallalliance.org/docs/a-call-to-truth-prudence-and-protection-of-the-poor.pdf

www.we-get-it.org

Singer, S. Fred, and Dennis T. Avery. *Unstoppable Global Warming Every 1500 Years.* Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, New York, 2007, (especially page 260).

Acton Institute, *Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, Grand Rapids, Mich./Acton Institute, 2007, (especially page 119).

Driessen, Paul. *Eco-Imperialism: Green Power, Black Death*. Bellevue, Wash./ Free Enterprise Press, 2003-2004, (especially page 182)

Schaeffer, Francis A. *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology*. Wheaton, Ill./ Tyndale House Publishers, 1970, (especially page 125)

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Christian Environmentalism – A Biblical Worldview Perspective on You and the Earth

Dr. Bohlin applies a biblical point of view in determining a concerned Christian relationship to environmentalism. As Christians, we know we have been made stewards of this earth, having a responsibility to care for it. Understanding our relationship to God and to the rest of creation gives us the right perspective to apply to this task.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Is There an Environmental Problem?



The news media are full of stories concerning environmental disasters of one kind or another, from global warming to endangered species to destruction of the rain forests to nuclear accidents. Some are real and some are imaginary, but it's not hard to notice that the environmental issue receives very little attention in Christian circles. There are so many other significant issues that occupy our attention that we seem to think of the environment as somebody else's issue. Many Christians are openly skeptical of the reality of any environmental crisis. It's viewed as a liberal issue, or New Age propaganda, or just plain unimportant since this earth will be destroyed after the millennium. What we fail to

realize is that Christians have a sacred responsibility to the earth and the creatures within it. The earth is being affected by humans in an unprecedented manner, and we do not know what the short or long term effects will be.

Calvin DeWitt, in his book *The Environment and the Christian*,{1} lists seven degradations of the earth. First, land is being converted from wilderness to agricultural use and from agricultural use to urban areas at an ever-increasing rate. Some of these lands cannot be reclaimed at all, at least not in the near future.

Second, as many as three species a day become extinct. Even if this figure is exaggerated, we still need to realize that once a species has disappeared, it is gone. Neither the species nor the role it occupied in the ecosystem can be retrieved.

Third, land continues to be degraded by the use of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. While many farmers are rebelling against this trend and growing their produce organically or without chemicals, the most profitable and largest growers still use an abundance of chemicals.

Fourth, the treatment of hazardous chemicals and wastes continues as an unsolved problem. Storing of medium term nuclear wastes is still largely an unsolved problem.

Fifth, pollution is rapidly becoming a global problem. Human garbage turns up on the shores of uninhabited South Pacific islands, far from the shipping lanes.

Sixth, our atmosphere appears to be changing. Is it warming due to the increase of gases like carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels? Is the ozone layer shrinking due to the use of chemicals contained in refrigerators, air conditioners, spray cans, and fire extinguishers? While I remain skeptical of the global threat that many see, pollution continues to be a local and regional concern prompting ever more stringent emission controls for our automobiles.

Seventh, we are losing the experiences of cultures that have lived in harmony with the creation for hundreds or even thousands of years. Cultures such as the Mennonites and Amish, as well as those of the rain forests, are crowded out by the expansion of civilization.

Never before have human beings wielded so much power over God's creation. How should we as Christians think about these problems?

The Environmental Ethics of Naturalism and Pantheism

Some people have blamed Western culture's Judeo-Christian heritage for the environmental crisis. These critics point squarely at Genesis 1:26-28, where God commands His new creation, man, to have dominion over the earth and to rule and subdue it.{2} This mandate is seen as a clear license to exploit the earth for man's own purposes. With this kind of philosophy, they ask, how can the earth ever be saved? While I will deal with the inaccuracy of this interpretation a little later, you can see why many of the leaders in the environmental movement are calling for a radical shift away from this Christian position. But what are the alternatives?

The need to survive provides a rationale for environmental concern within an *evolutionary* or *naturalistic* world view. Survival of the human species is the ultimate value. Man cannot continue to survive without a healthy planet. We must act to preserve the earth in order to assure the future of our children.

The evolutionary or naturalistic view of nature is, however, ultimately pragmatic. That is, nature has value only as long as we need it. The value of nature is contingent on the whim of egotistical man.{3} If, as technology increases, we are able to artificially reproduce portions of the ecosystem for our survival needs, then certain aspects of nature lose their

significance. We no longer need them to survive. This view is ultimately destructive, because man will possess only that which he needs. The rest of nature can be discarded.

In the fictional universe of *Star Trek*, vacations are spent in a computer generated virtual reality and meals are produced by molecular manipulation. No gardens, herds, or parks are needed. What value does nature have then?

Another alternative is the *pantheistic* or *New Age* worldview. Superficially, this view offers some hope. All of nature is equal because all is god and god is all. Nature is respected and valued because it is part of the essence of god. If humans have value, then nature has value.

But while pantheism elevates nature, it simultaneously degrades man and will ultimately degrade nature as well. To the pantheist, man has no more value than a blade of grass. In India the rats and cows consume needed grain and spread disease with the blessings of the pantheists. To restrict the rats and cows would be to restrict god, so man takes second place to the rats and cows. Man is a part of nature, yet it is man that is being restricted. So ultimately, all of nature is degraded.{4}

Pantheism claims that what is, is right. To clean up the environment would mean eliminating the undesirable elements. But, since god is all and in all, how can there be any undesirable elements? Pantheism fails because it makes no distinctions between man and nature.

The Christian Environmental Ethic

A true Christian environmental ethic differs from the naturalistic and pantheistic ethics in that it is based on the reality of God as Creator and man as his image-bearer and steward. God is the Creator of nature, not part of nature. He transcends nature (Gen. 1-2; Job 38-41; Ps. 19, 24, 104; Rom

1:18-20; Col. 1:16-17). All of nature, including man, is equal in its origin. Nature has value in and of itself because God created it. Nature's value is intrinsic; it will not change because the fact of its creation will not change.{5} The rock, the tree, and the cat deserve our respect because God made them to be as they are.{6}

While man is a creature and therefore is identified with the other creatures, he is also created in God's image. It is this image that separates humans from the rest of creation (Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 139:13-16).{7} God did not bestow His image anywhere else in nature.

Therefore, while a cat has value because God created it, it is inappropriate to romanticize the cat as though it had human emotions. All God's creatures glorify Him by their very existence, but only one is able to worship and serve Him by an act of the will.

But a responsibility goes along with bearing the image of God. In its proper sense, man's rule and dominion over the earth is that of a steward or a caretaker, not a reckless exploiter. Man is not sovereign over the lower orders of creation. Ownership is in the hands of the Lord.{8}

God told Adam and Eve to cultivate and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15), and we may certainly use nature for our benefit, but we may only use it as God intends. An effective steward understands that which he oversees, and science can help us discover the intricacies of nature.

Technology puts the creation to man's use, but unnecessary waste and pollution degrades it and spoils the creation's ability to give glory to its Creator. I think it is helpful to realize that we are to exercise dominion over nature, not as though we are entitled to exploit it, but as something borrowed or held in trust.

Recall that in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, the

steward who merely buried his talent out of fear of losing it was severely chastised. What little he did have was taken away and given to those who already had a great deal.{9} When Christ returns, His earth may well be handed back to Him rusted, corroded, polluted, and ugly. To what degree will you or I be held responsible?

This more thoroughly biblical view of nature and the environment will allow us to see more clearly the challenges that lie ahead. Our stewardship of the earth must grapple with the reality that it does not belong to us but to God though we have been given permission to use the earth for our basic needs.

Abuse of Dominion

While God intended us to live in harmony with nature, we have more often than not been at odds with nature. This reality tells us that man has not fulfilled his mandate. The source of our ecological crisis lies in man's fallen nature and the abuse of his dominion.

Man is a rebel who has set himself at the center of the universe. He has exploited created things as though they were nothing in themselves and as though he has an autonomous right to do so.{10} Man's abuse of his dominion becomes clear when we look at the value we place on time and money. Our often uncontrolled greed and haste have led to the deterioration of the environment.{11} We evaluate projects almost exclusively in terms of their potential impact on humans.

For instance, builders know that it is faster and more cost effective to bulldoze trees that are growing on the site of a proposed subdivision than it is to build the houses around them. Even if the uprooted trees are replaced with saplings once the houses are constructed, the loss of the mature trees enhances erosion, eliminates a means of absorbing pollutants, producing oxygen, and providing shade, and produces a scar

that heals slowly if at all.

Building around the trees, while more expensive and time-consuming, minimizes the destructive impact of human society on God's earth. But, because of man's sinful heart, the first option has been utilized more often than not.

As Christians we must treat nature as having value in itself, and we must be careful to exercise dominion without being destructive.{12} To quote Francis Schaeffer, We have the right to rid our house of ants; but what we have no right to do is to forget to honor the ant as God made it, out in the place where God made the ant to be. When we meet the ant on the sidewalk, we step over him. He is a creature, like ourselves; not made in the image of God, it is true, but equal with man as far as creation is concerned.{13}

The Bible contains numerous examples of the care with which we are expected to treat the environment. Leviticus 25:1-12 speaks of the care Israel was to have for the land. Deuteronomy 25:4 and 22:6 indicates the proper care for domestic animals and a respect for wildlife. In Isaiah 5:8-10 the Lord judges those who have misused the land. Job 38:25-28 and Psalm 104:27-30 speak of God's nurture and care for His creation. Psalm 104 tells us that certain places were made with certain animals in mind. This would make our national parks and wilderness preserves a biblical concept. And Jesus spoke on two occasions of how much the Father cared for even the smallest sparrow (Matt. 6:26, 10:29). How can we do less?

Christian Responsibility

I believe that as Christians we have a responsibility to the earth that exceeds that of unredeemed people. We are the only ones who are rightly related to the Creator. We should be showing others the way to environmental responsibility.

Christians, of all people, should not be destroyers, Schaeffer

said.{14} We may cut down a tree to build a house or to make a fire, but not just to cut it down. While there is nothing wrong with profit in the marketplace, in some cases we must voluntarily limit our profit in order to protect the environment.{15}

When the church puts belief into practice, our humanity and sense of beauty are restored.{16} But this is not what we see. Concern for the environment is not on the front burner of most evangelical Christians. The church has failed in its mission of steward of the earth.

We have spoken out loudly against the materialism of science as expressed in the issues of abortion, human dignity, evolution, and genetic engineering, but have shown ourselves to be little more than materialists in our technological orientation towards nature.{17} All too often Christians have adopted a mindset similar to a naturalist that would assert that simply more technology will answer our problems. In this respect we have essentially abandoned this very Christian issue.

By failing to fulfill our responsibilities to the earth, we are also losing a great evangelistic opportunity. Many young people in our society are seeking an improved environment, yet they think that most Christians don't care about ecological issues and that most churches offer no opportunity for involvement.{18} For example, in many churches today you can find soft drink machines dispensing aluminum cans with no receptacle provided to recycle the aluminum, one of our most profitable recyclable materials.

As a result, other worldviews and religions have made the environmental issue their own. Because the environmental movement has been co-opted by those involved in the New Age Movement particularly, many Christians have begun to confuse interest in the environment with interest in pantheism and have hesitated to get involved. But we cannot allow the enemy

to take over leadership in an area that is rightfully ours.

As the redeemed of the earth, our motivation to care for the land is even higher than that of the evolutionist, the Buddhist, or the advocate of the New Age. Jesus has redeemed all of the effects of the curse, including our relationship with God, our relationship with other people, and our relationship with the creation (1 Cor. 15:21-22, Rom. 5:12-21). Although the heavens and the earth will eventually be destroyed, we should still work for healing now.

For Further Reading

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1. Calvin DeWitt, ed., *The Environment and the Christian: What Does the New Testament Say About the Environment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).
2. Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science*, 155 (1967):1203-07.
3. Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), 26-27.
4. Ibid, 30-33.
5. Ibid, 47-49.
6. Ibid, 54-55.
7. Ibid, 49-50.
8. Ibid, 69.

9. Ibid, 69-70.
10. Ibid, 71.
11. Ibid, 83.
12. Ibid, 74-75.
13. Ibid, 74.
14. Ibid, 74.
15. Ibid, 90-91.
16. Ibid, 92-93.
17. Ibid, 85.
18. Ibid, 85.

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