



Letter to a Climate Sceptic

Written and Presented by Dr Joe Smith, Senior Lecturer in the Environment, Open University

Dear Friend

I'm writing this letter to you sitting on the smoker's bench in a glade of trees at the Open University's campus in Milton Keynes. I'm a stone's throw from Bob's room full of rocks, Vince Gauci's simulated wetlands and Mark's collection of Antarctic ice data. Different areas of science, but all contributing to one of the trickier questions humanity have ever set themselves: how is human activity altering the atmosphere? Their work, and that of thousands of others, has arrived at the conclusion that there's a 9 out of 10 certainty that human actions are increasing temperatures on Earth, and that this warming could have devastating consequences.

Scientists like Bob, Vince and Mark don't claim to know how much hotter its going to get, but almost all climate scientists agree the Earth is going to get at least 1 degree warmer over the next 90 years. Most are betting it's going to be as much as 2 or 3 degrees. OK, so warming temperatures might mean olives in Oxfordshire, but they're also going to bring more storms, floods, droughts and sea level rise. Some of the poorest people in the world and the most treasured wildlife habitats are likely to be hardest hit.

"Yeah yeah", I can hear you say, "you've said it all before." But I'm not sure you've ever really been listening to me.

During the last twenty years you've been polite if distant, viewing my 'global warming thing', as if I were a member of a discrete bible study group. But as climate politics gets serious, so is your assault on climate science. In fact, you could've almost written this extract from a letter to the Times Higher:

'Worthless degrees and PhDs are being churned out with this vomit as their core premise! ... a hypothesis that is intellectually so indefensible, so tawdry, so dishonest, so self-serving, so mean spirited, so corrupting that... (a)ny person who describes him/herself as a scientist, who promotes or condones the theory is ... a liar.'

If you're just half as angry as this I can see why we haven't been communicating. And perhaps I know why.

From this bench I'm looking across to the University's computing block. Hidden within is a server logging all of our old emails – perhaps even a few between you and me. Just like the University of East Anglia's server that had all its emails stolen last year?

Their theft, and worldwide posting, became a major news story that's credited with denting public confidence – as well as yours of course - in climate science around the world. Climate change scientists were taken apart for using the word 'trick' to describe the way they presented data, and for appearing to keep so called 'skeptics' out of academic journals. People became suspicious... questioning whether data had been manipulated to suit a 'pro climate change' argument? Was the real truth being hidden to suit the politicians?

A string of independent investigations have found these charges groundless, but the damage was done. The so-called scandal fed a media backlash – a backlash against the crocodile tears shed by politicians; against the postured worrying of manicured celebs and against the emotional blackmail of charity posters. The email storm served as a perfect antidote to the tedium of yet more aerial shots of polar bears paddling through not-so-icy Arctic waters.

In some ways, I know just how you feel: I reckon I've got more cause to be bored by the topic than most. For over twenty years now I've believed that climate change is one of the challenges of the age: one that we'll all be judged by.

For most of that time I've been in a misery-stricken minority, convinced that everyday human activity – moving, eating, keeping warm or cool – is gently stoking a slow boil apocalypse. And it's the slow, careful work by thousands of climate scientists that have got us to a point where we are finally beginning to understand the dangers of carrying on with 'business as usual'. I trust them – why don't you?

Ah yes, time for the money issue.....

When I hear people say that climate scientists are in it for the money, or chasing big grants - I want to chew off my own foot. Yes of course there's more money for research than there ever used to be, but, despite that, don't you think that government funding SHOULD be directed one of the biggest challenges facing humanity? And at a personal level, stop and think for a moment. If top scientists had been after cash they could have chosen any career on the list. Instead they've chosen a life of public sector pay and budget holidays. Have you seen a University car park?

It's also ludicrous to suggest that there's a global conspiracy of scientists. Do you really believe they've agreed to hide inconvenient data that doesn't fit 'the climate change line'? Research is all about evidence and argument. If there really was substantial evidence that climate change isn't caused by humans, then you can be sure plenty of ambitious scientists would have been quick to get that paper out and make their name. The fact that there is such a high degree of common ground around climate change research makes the issue all the more convincing – and all the more worrying.

So, my friend, who to trust? Well I've put my confidence in a profession where people are driven not by money or glory but by curiosity. We can only begin to make sense of way the biosphere, atmosphere, geosphere and human life fit together if a very wide range of very good brains give their best to it. Bob with his rocks, Vince in his wetlands and Mark with his Antarctic ice are all plugging away, doing their bit, looking to make sense of that bit of the world that they've given their life to understanding. And when you glue together their conclusions with those of thousands of others, there's only one answer - we are taking an enormous gamble with the way we run our lives.

So what's my conclusion? Well, climate science isn't 'finished'; in fact it's so complex it is probably unfinishable. But – and this may be the biggest "but" in human history – there's very wide agreement that we are influencing the climate in ways that will throw us, and the ecosystems that we depend on, some horrible surprises and terrible challenges.

These are perilous times. We're going to need your sharp sceptical eyes now that we're into the tricky business of judging what paths to take. But I think you're looking at climate science down the wrong end of the telescope . So what if we invest in adapting to environmental change and reducing emissions and the science turns out to be wrong? We'll leave the poorest in the world equipped to deal with natural hazards better and we'll have freed ourselves from our dangerous addiction to oil. Is that really such a big price to pay?

On the other hand, what if I'm right about climate change and we're delivered into a world of more droughts, storms, floods and food insecurity and the loss of treasured habitats and species? If they listen to you, the politicians and public will scratch it off the to-do list today, but people will be left paying the bill for centuries to come.

Trust me on this

Joe