

Questioning Climate Politics

Denis Rancourt says the “global warming myth” is part of the problem

Denis G. Rancourt is a professor of physics and an environmental science researcher at the University of Ottawa. His scientific research has been concentrated in the areas of spectroscopic and diffraction measurement methods, magnetism, reactive environmental nanoparticles, aquatic sediments and nutrients, and boreal forest lakes. He also teaches a popular class about activism, which is currently under attack by the University of Ottawa Administration.

He has written a wide-ranging critique of the science and politics of climate science, which he published on his web site (activistteacher.blogspot.com). Here, the Dominion asks him about his extremely unconventional stand on the science and politics of climate change.

The Dominion has long published articles that accept the overwhelming international scientific consensus that climate change is a fact, and that human-generated carbon emissions play a significant role in that trend. The individual members of the Dominion's editorial team that have looked at this interview still hold that view. But what we've realized in working on the following interview is that our understanding of climate change is based on what scientists tell us, not on knowledge that we can claim to possess. We've shown Rancourt's comments to two scientists, including a climatologist who is an International Panel on Climate Change lead author;

Dominion: You refer to a “myth of a global warming dominant threat,” and argue that there are greater threats currently facing humanity. Why have you chosen to advance this argument now?

DGR: I don't argue that there are greater threats. I argue that there are great threats and that global warming is not a threat. I have been researching and writing this article for many years; ever since I decided to switch my teaching and research interests from physics to environmental science. The recent increased mainstream media promotion of the global warming paradigm confirms my hypothesis that this paradigm does not threaten the main financial powers that control the media and that it probably

they viewed his scientific critique as lacking merit, and as such said they were not willing to engage in a spurious debate.

We are aware that a lot of time has been spent debating climate change, and it's a fact that the doubt created by this debate has provided some leeway for many damaging activities to continue.

Rancourt's critique challenges us to consider whether we need a reason like climate change to stop the massive damage being caused by extractive industries, the wildly inefficient and deadly dependence on cars, the wars fought and people killed for strategic control of resources, or the destruction of entire ecosystems. If the world was suddenly 100 per cent committed to stopping climate change, would those things stop? As it stands, few prominent climate activists are advancing an analysis of the economic system that lies behind the constant consumption of resources, leading to the humanitarian and environmental disasters described.

As for the science, the Dominion does not endorse Rancourt's remarks (or any other opinions not expressly signed by our editors). But neither do we think that thought that goes against our common assumptions should be ignored. Ideally, the ensuing discussion will challenge our collective understanding of the science and politics of climate change, and possibly change our perspective.—The Editors

serves power. I therefore made a special effort during the 2006 Xmas break to find time to finish a pedagogical version of the article. After experiencing how editors wanted to censor parts that would frustrate their readers or that were not in line with their publication mandates, I decided to blog it—a very un-academic thing to do.

In your article, you say that the conclusions of a lot of scientists—probably thousands of them—are basically incorrect. How do you explain what you argue is a massive collective error?

Relatively few of the relevant scientific conclusions in individual scientific articles are incorrect because scientists are very careful in drawing con-

clusions and they qualify and describe the validity limits of the trends that may be contained in their data. What I explain is (1) that advisory boards such as the IPCC are political, consensus-driven, and overemphasize generalizations, and (2) that there is a cultural bandwagon effect in science where many environmental scientists who are not climate experts will accept global warming as a background premise that motivates their specialized studies (in ecology for example). To the layperson (such as Al Gore) reviewing the scientific literature, this can be incorrectly interpreted as a broad consensus among experts. In fact, there is much debate among true climate experts—that I illustrate with many examples and over one hundred references.

You say that global warming is overblown as a threat, and that it doesn't exist as a global trend. What does this mean, exactly? Does it mean that sea levels not continue to rise? Will arctic permafrost not continue to melt? Or are you just saying that there's nothing we can do about these things?

I argue that there is no reliable evidence that the global average Earth surface temperature has increased in recent decades. I argue this by making a critique of how such trends are extracted, inferred and extrapolated from incomplete and artifact-laden data. I explain melting glaciers and receding permafrost as more probably arising from radiative mechanisms, linked to particulate pollution, land use/cover changes, and solar variations, rather than global warming. And I argue that atmospheric CO₂ does not control climate, but is at best a witness of global changes. These arguments are technical but I have tried to present them as simply and clearly as possible in the article.

More importantly, I argue that the real threat (the most destructive force on the planet) is power-driven financiers and profit-driven corporations and their cartels backed by military might and that you cannot control a monster by asking it not to shit as much. I argue that non-democratic control of the economy and institutionalized exploitation of the Third World (and all workers) must be confronted directly if we are to install sanity.

Do you think there is any relationship between these threats you name and what climate change activists are asking people to do in terms of reducing

their consumption of fossil fuels? Isn't oil one of the main driving factors in the wars that you mention?

Yes I do. Asking people to respond by changing their consumer habits is asking people to turn their attention to their consumer habits. This contributes to siphoning their vision onto their lifestyle choices and removes psychological focus from the person's political dimension. I argue that it is counter productive to stress people's individual choices and that we must find ways to make more political and social justice activists and organizers. I don't care that you emit more CO₂ by breathing when you chose a more active lifestyle but I appreciate that you are trying to be the most effective political activist possible and I honour the risk you must take in being an effective social justice activist.

Economic, human, and animal justice brings economic sustainability which in turn is always based on renewable practices. Recognizing the basic rights of native people automatically moderates resource extraction and preserves natural habitats. Not permitting imperialist wars and interventions automatically quenches nation-scale exploitation. True democratic control over monetary policy goes a long way in removing debt-based extortion.

We must not substitute the effect for the cause. All such substitutions can only weaken activism. Presently, power designs and controls the legislative apparatus, just as it constructs the mainstream mental environment. Only justice can give environmental sustainability and only resistance-imposed increased democratic control of land, resources, and the economy can give increased justice. These are lessons of history that no amount of atmospheric science can change.

Of course present imperialism and corporate globalization are based on oil and the associated cheap transportation. But



Processing centre at Alberta's tar sands. Will large-scale destruction of ecosystems be stopped by solutions like carbon trading?

Michael Kalus/Creative Commons 2.0

asking governments and corporations to sign onto carbon footprint reduction schemes and to trade carbon credits is not going to change that.

A study from the University of Leeds predicted that habitat destruction caused by climate change could render up to a million species extinct. Are these kinds of predictions subject to the same critique you bring to climate science?

There are many such studies. Ecologists studying biodiversity are not climate experts and establishing species extinction is a difficult exercise. These are tenuous theoretical scenarios based on hypothetical changes. Natural animal and plant life are threatened by habitat destruction. The way to stop destroying habitat is to stop destroying habitat. Local ownership and control by inhabitants does wonders in this direction, compared to profit-driven corporate exploitation installed by national debt coercion. These are the same corporations that fund Kyoto lobby groups to promote carbon credits and windmills-for-oil schemes.

Weather changes have great

impacts on artificially delimited micro-habitats whereas ecosystems have remarkable robustness if migration into neighbouring environments is not inhibited. For example, North America was regularly swept with massive forest fires before continental forest management was implemented and this did not cause species extinction but clear cutting and economic reforestation does reduce bio-diversity.

I argue that the "myth of a global warming dominant threat" serves to sanitize the debate and to turn our attention away from the undressed confrontation that must eventually occur between people and the hydra that exploit people if we care about life and justice. These confrontations are occurring in many parts of the world, while First Worlders debate Kyoto implementation strategies and nurture the illusion that corporations can be cajoled to be good corporate citizens. That is why more and more of my work involves activism.

But the goals of reducing consumption of fossil fuels would seem to be compatible with acting against exploitation and destruction, even if they aren't the same thing. What makes you want to

confront the basis for it, and directly undermine it?

Truth and strong commitment to justice are a valid basis for a social movement, not compatible goals. Global warming or atmospheric planetary science is in its early developmental stages, with powerful computers, high-resolution field measurements, and satellite probing having just entered the scene, and at present at best provides tenuous suggestions. I have watched scientists study environmental degradation rather than denounce its most virulent forms for decades. In the 70s an army of government and university scientists tried to detect the relatively subtle effects of acid rain while deforestation, agriculture, mineral and energy extraction, over-fishing, and an exploding cottage industry transformed the boreal forest and its lakes. Most of the research had to be concentrated in a few pristine areas in national parks so that the subtle effects could be studied...

In pedagogy, one learns that the only way to get a student to accept a new paradigm is to enter into authentic discourse and to confront the student's views that are incompatible with the more broadly based model. We are all both teachers and students.

We need to stop listening to scientists, who for societal reasons usually serve and at best do not threaten power, and start seeing what is obvious to inhabitants of the Third World: Finance-driven exploitation destroys and kills. Let us stop trying to manage the planet, stop believing that consumer choices could fix or even improve things in the present corporate marketing regime, and start thinking about how to correctly identify and effectively challenge the instruments of exploitation. The main relevant personal decision is how much risk one is prepared to take, not whether the coffee has a Fair Trade label. Life is risk. Let's join the living.