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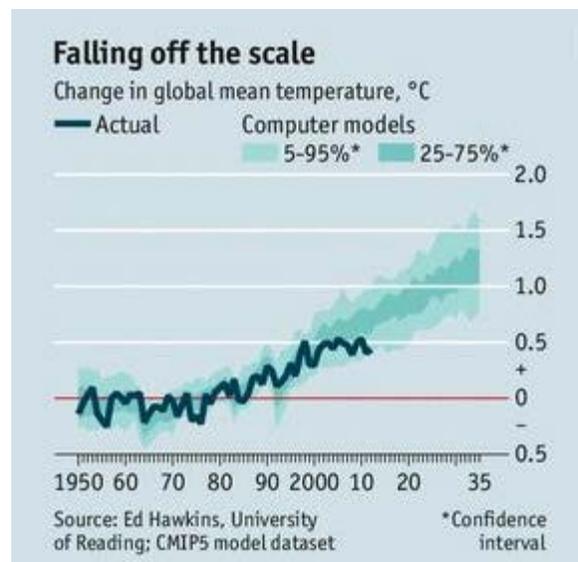
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CENTER FOR INQUIRY

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Is Consensus Changing on Climate-Change Plateau?

By [Gary P. Posner](#)

As we reported in our [Winter 2012-13 issue](#), the Met Office (the U.K.'s national weather service) released figures last October documenting a 16-year plateau in global temperatures. Britain's venerable *The Economist*, in a [March 30, 2013, article](#), says, "Over the past 15 years air temperatures at the Earth's surface have been flat while greenhouse-gas emissions have continued to soar." And though short-term fluctuations in the overall trend are to be expected, an accompanying graph (see right) by Ed Hawkins of Britain's University of Reading shows that, in the article's words, "surface temperatures since 2005 are already at the low end of the range of projections derived from 20 climate models [and if] they remain flat, they will fall outside the models' range within a few years."



NASA scientist David Morrison, writing in the March/April 2010 *Skeptical Inquirer*, declared what has been the scientific consensus view that the notion of a plateau (which was only slightly younger in 2010) is a "misinterpretation" based upon "the anomalously high temperature in 1998," and that in actuality "temperatures during the past decade have continued the warming trend of the 1990s." Two issues later, Morrison amplified, "The evidence for [continuing] rapid global warming is incontrovertible," and ended with this thought: "There is much we don't know, especially in predicting the future course of climate change. But if we deny the current situation, we have no hope of understanding the future that faces our planet."

Despite the heated climate of "climate change" coverage in the U.S. press, what if the "current situation" *really is* nearly two decades of flat temperatures that are within a shade of falling below the range of the widely accepted climate-change models? In our last issue, [Paul Clifford's article](#) argued that a plateau of this relatively brief duration can be misleading, and offered several possible explanations for it. But according to the *Economist* article, "The mismatch between rising greenhouse-gas emissions and not-rising temperatures is among the biggest puzzles in climate science just now."

One explanation offered in that article is a possible "temporary lag" between rising CO2 and higher temperatures. Then, incredibly: "Or it might be that the 1990s, when temperatures were rising fast, was the anomalous period." (The matter-of-fact manner in which that sentence graces the page seems as alien to these American eyes as a flying saucer sighting.) And the third posited possibility: "Or, as an increasing body of research is suggesting, it may be that the climate is responding to higher concentrations of carbon dioxide in ways that had not been properly understood before," i.e., that what is termed "climate sensitivity" may be lower than the models assume, and the article cites a few studies in this regard.

I found the following sentence about clouds particularly interesting: "In all [general-circulation climate] models, clouds amplify global warming, sometimes by a lot." This runs counter to the theory, first proposed by solar physicist Henrik Svensmark, that significant global *cooling* may be on the horizon due to a cyclical reversal of solar activity (i.e., sunspots and solar wind) from unusually high to unusually low. An October 28, 2004, study in *Nature* (not mentioned in the *Economist* article) had found that "the level of solar activity during the past 70 years is exceptional [and unparalleled since] more than 8,000 years ago." But the more recent lull in sunspot activity is now resulting in far less solar wind of charged particles whizzing by our planet. As Svensmark's theory goes, less cosmic rays are thus being deflected away from our atmosphere by the solar wind and more of them are seeding cloud formation, leading to cooling. Yes, says *The Economist*, "It is even possible that some clouds may dampen, not amplify, global warming—which may also help explain the hiatus in rising temperatures."

The *Economist* article also says that "there is some evidence that the natural (i.e., non-man-made) variability of temperatures may be somewhat greater than the IPCC has thought. A recent paper . . . in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* links temperature changes from 1750 to natural changes (such as sea temperatures in the Atlantic Ocean) and suggests that 'the anthropogenic global-warming trends might have been overestimated by a factor of two in the second half of the 20th century'" (parentheses in original).

On April 16 of this year, the Reuters news service carried [an article](#), "Climate scientists struggle to explain warming slowdown." Excerpts: "Scientists are struggling to explain a slowdown in climate change that has exposed gaps in their understanding and defies a rise in global greenhouse gas emissions. . . . Theories for the pause include that deep oceans have taken up more heat with the result that the surface is cooler than expected, that industrial pollution in Asia or clouds are blocking the sun, or that greenhouse gases trap less heat than previously believed. The change may be a result of an observed decline in heat-trapping water vapor in the high atmosphere, for unknown reasons. It could be a combination of factors or some as yet unknown natural variations, scientists say."

And a [May 26 op-ed](#) in *Forbes*, citing in great detail the historical precedents, goes so far as to make a speculative case for not merely a temporary pause in global warming, but the ushering in of a new "Little Ice Age." From that piece:

The height of the Little Ice Age is generally dated as 1650 to 1850 A.D. . . . The Little Ice Age, following the historically warm temperatures of the Medieval Warm Period . . . has been attributed to natural cycles in solar activity, particularly sunspots. . . . The increase in global temperatures since the late 19th century just reflects the end of the Little Ice Age. The global temperature trends since then have followed not rising CO2 trends but the ocean temperature cycles of the Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO) and the Atlantic Multidecadal Oscillation (AMO). Every 20 to 30 years, the much colder water near the bottom of the oceans cycles up to the top, where it has a slight cooling effect on global temperatures until the sun warms that water. That warmed water then contributes to slightly warmer global temperatures, until the next churning cycle. . . . The 20 to 30 year ocean temperature cycles turned back to warm from the late 1970s until the late 1990s, which is the primary reason that global temperatures warmed during this period. . . . But something much more ominous has [also recently] developed [regarding] sunspot activity [having] collapsed. . . .

Disputing the very existence (not merely the significance) of the temperature plateau, the May/June 2013 *Skeptical Inquirer* (published by the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry) endorsed and printed a column, signed by 17 members of New Mexicans for Science and Reason (including two CSI Fellows), asserting that global warming continues "even faster than previously estimated" and that "the climatic average temperature is significantly higher now than it was in 1998" -- even though the measurements are below, as Dr. Morrison described it, "the anomalously high temperature in 1998."

James Hansen, for years NASA's point man on global warming until his retirement in April to "devote [my] full time to trying to help the public understand the urgency of addressing climate change," predicted in [his January 2013 annual update](#) that "global temperature will rise significantly in the next few years as the tropics moves [*sic*] inevitably to the next El Nino phase." But at least equally notable was his acknowledgment, apparently for the first time in print, that "the 5-year running mean of global temperature has been flat for the past decade" -- meaning a flat average global temperature for the past 15 years. (Though I became aware of Hansen's article only after our last issue went to press, I referenced the same "running mean" data in my editorial reply at the end.)

Whatever one's personal views may be regarding "climate change" and its potential adverse global effects, even if manmade CO2 (which comprises only about 5% of the total CO2 released into the atmosphere annually) *is* the overwhelming driving force, and even if the oceans' depths *are* sequestering significant heat that would otherwise manifest on the planet's surface, and even if a surface temperature plateau of 15 years *can* be misleading, perhaps the scientific community may be on the verge of grudgingly reaching a "consensus" on what seems to be an undeniable fact -- that despite mankind's soaring CO2 emissions, the mean global surface temperature has been flat for the past decade and a half, and we aren't really certain as to why.

[Also see [Gary Posner's essay](#), "One skeptic's view of the global warming controversy," in the Summer 2013 *Skeptical Briefs*.]

Snippets



Anyone in the greater Tampa/Plant City area experiencing metaphysical-type oddities in their home can count on Officer L.T. Cochran of the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office to nip them in the bud. His Plant City Paranormal Research team presently consists of eight investigators who employ prayer and holy water, in addition to \$5,000 worth of electronic equipment, to diagnose and cure the causes of such disturbances. "I try to offer solutions with Christian ethics and morals," says Cochran, and his having grown up in a home haunted by the spirit of a young boy, and his later studies in theology and demonology, seem to serve him well.

(Plant City Observer, Oct. 25, 2012)

And some good news about the ability of Americans to think rationally! In a recent survey by Public Policy Polling, only 4% of respondents (barely more than 12 million of our friends and neighbors) seem to believe that "shape-shifting reptilian people control our world by taking on human form and gaining political power to manipulate our societies." Reassuringly, far more, in the neighborhood of 84 million, are of the far saner opinion that "a secretive power elite with a globalist agenda is conspiring to eventually rule the world through an authoritarian world government or New World Order." And when queried, only about 39 million expressed belief that President Obama is the anti-Christ (and about 15 million of those said they voted for him)! The reporter says that "Jim Williams, a polling analyst with the company, told me they had to throw in some semi-serious questions to get people to answer [the poll's other serious questions] seriously."

(Newsday via Tampa Tribune, April 13)

Florida Skeptics Forms as IIG–Florida Fizzles

As Martha Keller, founder of [Pinellas County Skeptics](#), [reported](#) in our Winter 2012-13 issue, she had hoped to spearhead the development of a vibrant Independent Investigations Group (IIG) in Florida. IIGs, which currently exist in Atlanta, Colorado, Washington DC, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Alberta, Canada, are affiliated with the Center for Inquiry (CFI), with the purpose of promoting more skeptical investigations of paranormal claims, backed by the lure of a CFI-guaranteed \$50,000 prize to anyone able to successfully demonstrate such abilities.

In the Fall 2012 *TBS Report*, [Martha explained](#) that the creation of such groups "is not intended to replace any local skeptical groups, but rather, to be a way for skeptics in the area to become more active in investigations." The [original IIG](#), associated with Center For Inquiry–Los Angeles, has been wildly successful, and Martha had been working with its chairman, James Underdown in creating an IIG–Florida.

Unfortunately, although several members from Tampa Bay Skeptics, Suncoast Skeptics, and Pinellas County Skeptics showed for an organizational meeting last November 10, Martha has recently moved out of state and is no longer in a position to organize or participate in an IIG in Florida, and the effort is now on hold.

On the brighter side, however, there is now a statewide [Florida Skeptics](#) website-based group, which is looking for additional writers. TBS has given its permission to reproduce (with appropriate credit) anything they may desire from *TBS Report*.

Rick O'Keefe Replaces Jack Robinson on TBS Executive Council

Citing family responsibilities that now require most of his time, [Jack Robinson](#) has reluctantly reached the conclusion that he must resign from his post as Vice Chairman of TBS. He hopes, however, to be able to continue to attend the quarterly meetings, and remains available to our group as a Consultant.

Replacing Jack on the Executive Council will be [Rick O'Keefe](#), the Branch Coordinator of the Center For Inquiry–Tampa Bay. Rick also is a founder and the CEO Emeritus of the [Tampa Bay Coalition of Reason](#), as well as Special Projects Director of the [Tampa Bay Post Carbon Council](#).

James W. Moseley (1931-2012)

James Moseley, a fascinating character best known as publisher of the lively [Saucer Smear](#) newsletter, may need to name his new publication *UFO (Updates from Oblivion)*, having passed into the next dimension of existence(?) last November.

Moseley contributed several articles to *TBS Report* over the years, and our humble editor had many letters published in *Smear*.

For more about Moseley, see [his Wikipedia write-up](#) (including the "[External links](#)") as well as this [blog entry](#) by Robert Sheaffer.

Miles W. Hardy (1926-2013)

[Miles W. Hardy](#), who served as TBS's vice chairman from our inception in 1988 until his resignation (for age-related health reasons) in 2006, died on January 5, just seven days after the passing of his wife Patricia.

As we wrote in our Winter 2006-07 issue, Miles had been "a favorite [TV guest](#) of Kathy Fountain's [and] played an integral role in TBS's achieving instant credibility with the media and the public at large."

For decades a clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at the University of South Florida, Miles was one of USF's initial hires in its infancy, and helped found the Psychology Department and its clinical graduate program.

Miles and Pat leave behind seven children, nine grandchildren, one great-grandchild, legions of grateful USF graduates, and myriad other admirers.

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