

# Climate Change Skeptics

Simon Brett  
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Meeting with Scepticism.

Virtually every reputable climate scientist on the planet agrees that human activity is causing a dangerous warming of the planet. A quick scan of the web, however, creates the impression that this reality is still controversial. So how come, on the internet, no-one can hear you make a balanced argument?

George Monbiot, who has done more than most to alert us to the scale of the crisis, and to possible resolutions, explains the situation thus:

In the physical world, global warming appears to be spilling over into runaway feedback: the most dangerous situation humankind has ever encountered. In the political world – at the climate talks in Poznan for example – our governments seem to be responding to something quite different: a minor nuisance which can be addressed in due course ... In cyberspace, by contrast, the response spreading fastest and furthest is flat-out denial.

Why should this be? Why, precisely when we need to be taking major action to limit our emissions, are so many of us retreating into hokum? It only takes a few minutes research to discover that the sources of popular anti-climate change arguments are utterly bogus. The troposphere isn't warming? Oh yes it is. John Christy, who initially suggested that it wasn't, has confirmed that his numbers were erroneous – yet his initial paper is still widely promoted as solid evidence of controversy.

In fact, pretty much every argument against current climate change being a) human-caused and b) extremely dangerous is debunked here: <http://www.skepticalscience.com/argument.php>. So, to steal a line from Agent Mulder, the truth is out there. The real question is: why aren't we listening to it?

One reason is undoubtedly that certain vested interests have made it their ambition to sow the seeds of doubt and create the impression of controversy. In 'Heat,' his book mapping a potential way to mitigate the worst effects, Monbiot cites the oil industry and the tobacco industry. The former clearly have a great deal to gain in the short-term from climate skepticism. The latter, Monbiot claims, have funded a coalition with a mission to obscure scientific consensus on a wide range of issues, of which climate change is only one. Why? By creating the impression that scientists are not to be trusted, they hope to fuel widespread antipathy to findings listing the dangers of passive smoking.

In other words, there is undoubtedly a denial industry; an enthusiastic and well-funded minority labouring to create the impression that climate change is a myth or a controversy. That doesn't really explain why we're so eager to believe them, though.

It's fairly well accepted that our peer group constitutes a major source of influence on our behaviour. George Marshall, author of Carbon Detox, has suggested that this provides an explanation for the popularity of climate change denial. If the people who are close to us are in denial, or even just skeptical, it can be very easy to allow ourselves to slip into similar patterns of belief.

Another plausible explanation is the obvious appeal of denial in comparison with acceptance. The payoff for denial is obvious. Psychological comfort, married with the relief from pain and worry that accompanies it. Some might say that this is an understandable response. Getting a sense of the scale and difficulty of climate change as a problem is such a disturbing experience that maybe the deniers are the smart ones! At least, with a bit of luck, they'll die happy – and maybe enjoy another twenty good years between now and then.

In contrast, acknowledging the realities can lead to considerable fear and a sense of isolation. The whole situation can easily appear hopeless and depressing. That's not to mention the guilt which comes from recognising one's own inevitable contributions to the problem (for those of us living in the UK, at least).

Nonetheless, if we're going to avoid a climate catastrophe, we need to get past denial and move forward more positively. How do we go about doing that? The Transition Towns model certainly seems to be one possibility. It's based on the idea that climate change, in conjunction with the encroaching oil peak, offers a tremendous opportunity to redesign our societies in ways that are actually more harmonious and satisfying. Resilience of communities, localisation and quality

of life are emphasised within the Transition Towns approach. This chimes nicely with the idea that we need to change the way we think of these events if addressing them is to be seen as a realistic, or even an inspiring, possibility.

While climate change is seen only as a threat, in other words, the temptation is to resist it. One way of doing that is simply to deny that it is even happening. If, however, it can also be seen as an opportunity, maybe we can find the motivation to make a difference.