

THIS IS THE TEXT OF AN ESSAY IN THE WEB SITE “*THE DISCOVERY OF GLOBAL WARMING*” BY SPENCER WEART, [HTTP://WWW.AIP.ORG/HISTORY/CLIMATE](http://www.aip.org/history/climate). JANUARY 2011. HYPERLINKS WITHIN THAT SITE ARE NOT INCLUDED IN THIS FILE. FOR AN OVERVIEW SEE THE BOOK OF THE SAME TITLE (HARVARD UNIV. PRESS, REV. ED. 2008). COPYRIGHT © 2003-2011 SPENCER WEART & AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF PHYSICS.

The Carbon Dioxide Greenhouse Effect

In the 19th century, scientists realized that gases in the atmosphere cause a “greenhouse effect” which affects the planet’s temperature. These scientists were interested chiefly in the possibility that a lower level of carbon dioxide gas might explain the ice ages of the distant past. At the turn of the century, Svante Arrhenius calculated that emissions from human industry might someday bring a global warming. Other scientists dismissed his idea as faulty. In 1938, G.S. Callendar argued that the level of carbon dioxide was climbing and raising global temperature, but most scientists found his arguments implausible. It was almost by chance that a few researchers in the 1950s discovered that global warming truly was possible. In the early 1960s, C.D. Keeling measured the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere: it was rising fast. Researchers began to take an interest, struggling to understand how the level of carbon dioxide had changed in the past, and how the level was influenced by chemical and biological forces. They found that the gas plays a crucial role in climate change, so that the rising level could gravely affect our future. (This essay covers only developments relating directly to carbon dioxide, with a separate essay for Other Greenhouse Gases. For related theoretical issues, see the essay on Simple Models of Climate.)

GREENHOUSE SPECULATIONS: ARRHENIUS AND CHAMBERLIN - SKEPTICISM (1900-1940s) - CALLENDAR’S ADVOCACY - THE SPECULATIONS VINDICATED (1950-1958) - KEELING’S CURVE - CARBON DIOXIDE AS THE KEY TO CLIMATE CHANGE? (1960s-1970s) - EVIDENCE FROM THE ICE - TIME LAGS AND FEEDBACKS (1990s) - THE COMPUTER MODELS VINDICATED (1990s-2000s) - PROSPECTS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Like many Victorian natural philosophers, John Tyndall was fascinated by a great variety of questions. While he was preparing an important treatise on “Heat as a Mode of Motion” he took time to consider geology. Tyndall had hands-on knowledge of the subject, for he was an ardent Alpinist (in 1861 he made the first ascent of the Weisshorn). Familiar with glaciers, he had been convinced by the evidence—hotly debated among scientists of his day—that tens of thousands of years ago, colossal layers of ice had covered all of northern Europe. How could climate possibly change so radically?

One possible answer was a change in the composition of the Earth’s atmosphere. Beginning with work by Joseph Fourier in the 1820s, scientists had understood that gases in the atmosphere might trap the heat received from the Sun. As Fourier put it, energy in the form of visible light from the Sun easily penetrates the atmosphere to reach the surface and heat it up, but heat cannot so easily escape back into space. For the air absorbs invisible heat rays (“infrared radiation”) rising from the surface. The warmed air radiates some of the energy back down to the surface, helping it stay warm. This was the effect that would later be called, by an inaccurate analogy, the “greenhouse effect.” The equations and data available to 19th-century scientists were far too

poor to allow an accurate calculation. Yet the physics was straightforward enough to show that a bare, airless rock at the Earth's distance from the Sun should be far colder than the Earth actually is.

Tyndall set out to find whether there was in fact any gas in the atmosphere that could trap heat rays. In 1859, his careful laboratory work identified several gases that did just that. The most important was simple water vapor (H_2O). Also effective was carbon dioxide (CO_2), although in the atmosphere the gas is only a few parts in ten thousand. Just as a sheet of paper will block more light than an entire pool of clear water, so the trace of CO_2 altered the balance of heat radiation through the entire atmosphere.¹ (*For a more complete explanation of how the "greenhouse effect" works, see the separate essay on Simple Models of Climate.*)

Greenhouse Speculations: Arrhenius and Chamberlin

The next major scientist to consider the Earth's temperature was another man with broad interests, Svante Arrhenius in Stockholm. He too was attracted by the great riddle of the prehistoric ice ages, and he saw CO_2 as the key. Why focus on that rare gas rather than water vapor, which was far more abundant? Because the level of water vapor in the atmosphere fluctuated daily, whereas the level of CO_2 was set over a geological timescale by emissions from volcanoes. If the emissions changed, the alteration in the CO_2 greenhouse effect would only slightly change the global temperature—but that would almost instantly change the average amount of water vapor in the air, which would bring further change through its own greenhouse effect. Thus the level of CO_2 acted as a regulator of water vapor, and ultimately determined the planet's long-term equilibrium temperature (*again, for full discussion see the essay on Simple Models of Climate.*)

In 1896 Arrhenius completed a laborious numerical computation which suggested that cutting the amount of CO_2 in the atmosphere by half could lower the temperature in Europe some 4-5°C (roughly 7-9°F)—that is, to an ice age level. But this idea could only answer the riddle of the ice ages if such large changes in atmospheric composition really were possible. For that question Arrhenius turned to a colleague, Arvid Högbom. It happened that Högbom had compiled estimates for how carbon dioxide cycles through natural geochemical processes, including emission from volcanoes, uptake by the oceans, and so forth. Along the way he had come up with a strange, almost incredible new idea.

It had occurred to Högbom to calculate the amounts of CO_2 emitted by factories and other industrial sources. Surprisingly, he found that human activities were adding CO_2 to the atmosphere at a rate roughly comparable to the natural geochemical processes that emitted or absorbed the gas. As another scientist would put it a decade later, we were "evaporating" our coal mines into the air. The added gas was not much compared with the volume of CO_2 already

¹ Tyndall (1861). Tyndall measured what he called "carbonic acid" gas, a common term for what is now called carbon dioxide.

in the atmosphere—the CO₂ released from the burning of coal in the year 1896 would raise the level by scarcely a thousandth part. But the additions might matter if they continued long enough.¹ (By recent calculations, the total amount of carbon laid up in coal and other fossil deposits that humanity can readily get at and burn is some ten times greater than the total amount in the atmosphere.) So the next CO₂ change might not be a cooling decrease, but an increase. Arrhenius made a calculation for doubling the CO₂ in the atmosphere, and estimated it would raise the Earth's temperature some 5-6°C (averaged over all zones of latitude).²

Arrhenius did not see that as a problem. He figured that if industry continued to burn fuel at the current (1896) rate, it would take perhaps three thousand years for the CO₂ level to rise so high. Högbom doubted it would ever rise that much. One thing holding back the rise was the oceans. According to a simple calculation, sea water would absorb 5/6ths of any additional gas. (That is roughly true over a long run of many thousand years, but Högbom and Arrhenius did not realize that if the gas were emitted more rapidly than they expected, the ocean absorption could lag behind.) Anyway temperatures a few degrees higher hardly sounded like a bad idea in chilly Sweden. Another highly respected scientist, Walter Nernst, even fantasized about setting fire to useless coal seams in order to release enough CO₂ to deliberately warm the Earth's climate.³

Arrhenius brought up the possibility of future warming in an impressive scientific article and a widely read book. By the time the book was published, 1908, the rate of coal burning was already significantly higher than in 1896, and Arrhenius suggested warming might appear within a few centuries rather than millenia. Yet here as in his first article, the possibility of warming in some distant future was far from his main point. He mentioned it only in passing, during a detailed discussion of what really interested scientists of his time—the cause of the ice ages. Arrhenius had not quite discovered global warming, but only a curious theoretical concept.⁴

An American geologist, T. C. Chamberlin, and a few others took an interest in CO₂. How, they wondered, is the gas stored and released as it cycles through the Earth's reservoirs of sea water and minerals, and also through living matter like forests? Chamberlin was emphatic that the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere did not necessarily stay the same over the long term. But these scientists too were pursuing the ice ages and other, yet more ancient climate changes—gradual

¹ Högbom (1894); the essentials are quoted by Arrhenius (1896), pp. 269-73; see also Berner (1995); for further background, see Arrhenius (1997). The word “evaporating” was first used by Lotka in 1908, see Pilson (2006).

² He also did computations for 1.5-, 2.5- and 3-fold increases. Arrhenius (1896), 266; see Crawford (1996), chap. 10; Crawford (1997); reprinted with further articles in Rodhe and Charlson (1998).

³ Nernst also noted that the additional CO₂ would fertilize crops. James Franck, interview by Thomas Kuhn, p. 6, Archive for History of Quantum Physics, copies at AIP and other repositories..

⁴ Arrhenius (1896); revised calculations, finding a somewhat lower effect, were given in Arrhenius (1901a); popularization: Arrhenius (1908), chap. 2.

shifts over millions of years. Very different climates, like the balmy age of dinosaurs a hundred million years ago, puzzled geologists but seemed to have nothing to do with changes on a human time scale. Nobody took much interest in the hypothetical future warming caused by human industry.

Skepticism (1900-1940s)

Experts could dismiss the hypothesis because they found Arrhenius's calculation implausible on many grounds. In the first place, he had grossly oversimplified the climate system. Among other things, he had failed to consider how cloudiness might change if the Earth got a little warmer and more humid. A still weightier objection came from a simple laboratory measurement. A few years after Arrhenius published his hypothesis, another scientist in Sweden, Knut Ångström, asked an assistant to measure the passage of infrared radiation through a tube filled with carbon dioxide. The assistant ("Herr J. Koch," otherwise unrecorded in history) put in rather less of the gas in total than would be found in a column of air reaching to the top of the atmosphere. The assistant reported that the amount of radiation that got through the tube scarcely changed when he cut the quantity of gas back by a third. Apparently it took only a trace of the gas to "saturate" the absorption—that is, in the bands of the spectrum where CO₂ blocked radiation, it did it so thoroughly that more gas could make little difference.¹

Still more persuasive was the fact that water vapor, which is far more abundant in the air than carbon dioxide, also intercepts infrared radiation. In the crude spectrographs of the time, the smeared-out bands of the two gases entirely overlapped one another. More CO₂ could not affect radiation in bands of the spectrum that water vapor, as well as CO₂ itself, were already blocking entirely.²

These measurements and arguments had fatal flaws. Herr Koch had reported to Ångström that the absorption had not been reduced by more than 0.4% when he lowered the pressure, but a modern calculation shows that the absorption would have decreased about 1%—like many a researcher, the assistant was over confident about his degree of precision.³ But even if he had seen the 1% shift, Ångström would have thought this an insignificant perturbation. He failed to understand that the logic of the experiment was altogether false.

¹ Ångström (1900).

² Ångström (1900), pp. 731-32; Abbot and Fowle (1908), pp. 172-73; for spectrographs, e.g., Weber and Randall (1932).

³ Koch had only a thermocouple to measure heat across the entire infrared spectrum. He accurately reported that about 10% of the radiation from a 100°C black body was absorbed in his tube, and that at lower pressure at most 9.6% was absorbed, whereas in fact it must have been about 9%. For the modern calculation I thank Raymond T. Pierrehumbert. For a more complete technical account of the saturation fallacy, see his discussion at <http://www.realclimate.org/index.php/archives/2007/06/a-saturated-gassy-argument-part-ii/>

The greenhouse effect will in fact operate even if the absorption of radiation were totally saturated in the lower atmosphere. The planet's temperature is regulated by the thin upper layers where radiation does escape easily into space. Adding more greenhouse gas there will change the balance. Moreover, even a 1% change in that delicate balance would make a serious difference in the planet's surface temperature. The logic is rather simple once it is grasped, but it takes a new way of looking at the atmosphere—not as a single slab, like the gas in Koch's tube (or the glass over a greenhouse), but as a set of interacting layers. (*The full explanation is in the essay on Simple Models.*)

The subtle difference was scarcely noticed for many decades, if only because hardly anyone thought the greenhouse effect was worth their attention. After Ångström published his conclusions in 1900, the small group of scientists who had taken an interest in the matter concluded that Arrhenius's hypothesis had been proven wrong and turned to other problems. Arrhenius responded with a long paper, criticizing Koch's measurement in scathing terms. He also developed complicated arguments to explain that absorption of radiation in the upper layers was important, water vapor was not important in those very dry layers, and anyway the bands of the spectrum where water vapor was absorbed did not entirely overlap the CO₂ absorption bands. Other scientists seem not to have noticed or understood the paper. Theoretical work on the question stagnated for decades, and so did measurement of the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere and its absorption of radiation.¹

A few scientists dissented from the view that changes of CO₂ could have no effect. An American physicist, E.O. Hulburt, pointed out in 1931 that investigators had been mainly interested in pinning down the intricate structure of the absorption bands (which offered fascinating insights into the new theory of quantum mechanics) “and not in getting accurate absorption coefficients.” Hulburt's own calculations supported Arrhenius's estimate that doubling or halving CO₂ would bring something like a 4°C rise or fall of surface temperature, and thus “the carbon dioxide theory of the ice ages... is a possible theory.”² Hardly anyone noticed this paper. Hulburt was an obscure worker at the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory, and he published in a journal, the *Physical Review*, that few meteorologists read. Their general consensus was the one stated in such authoritative works as the American Meteorological Society's 1951 *Compendium of Meteorology*: the idea that adding CO₂ would change the

¹ Fleming (2000), p. 301; for early measurements and additional background and references, see Mudge (1997). Ångström's argument was immediately accepted in for example, *Monthly Weather Review* (1901). Response: Arrhenius (1901b) . One leading expert dismissing CO₂ because of saturation was Humphreys (1913), pp. 134-35, although while denying that doubling the amount in the atmosphere would “appreciably affect the total amount of radiation actually absorbed,” he did note that it would “affect the vertical distribution or location of the absorption,” Humphreys (1920), p. 58; on CO₂ saturation, Schaefer (1905), p. 104.

² Hulburt (1931), quote p. 1876; note also Simpson (1928b), who finds CO₂ adds a correction—but only a small one—to water vapor absorption.

climate “was never widely accepted and was abandoned when it was found that all the long-wave radiation [that would be] absorbed by CO₂ is [already] absorbed by water vapor.”¹

Even if people had recognized this was untrue, there were other well-known reasons to deny any greenhouse effect in the foreseeable future. These reasons reflected a nearly universal conviction that the Earth automatically regulated itself in a “balance of nature.” Getting to specifics, scientists repeated the plausible argument that the oceans would absorb any excess gases that came into the atmosphere. Fifty times more carbon is dissolved in sea water than in the wispy atmosphere. Thus the oceans would determine the equilibrium concentration of CO₂, and it would not easily stray from the present numbers.

If somehow the oceans failed to stabilize the system, organic matter was another good candidate for providing what one scientist called “homeostatic regulation.”² The amount of carbon in the atmosphere is only a small fraction of what is bound up not only in the oceans but also in trees, peat bogs, and so forth. Just as sea water would absorb more gas if the concentration increased, so would plants grow more lushly in air that was “fertilized” with extra carbon dioxide. Rough calculations seemed to confirm the comfortable belief that biological systems would stabilize the atmosphere by absorbing any surplus. One way or another, then, whatever gases humanity added to the atmosphere would be absorbed—if not at once, then within a century or so—and the equilibrium would automatically restore itself. As one respected expert put it baldly in 1948, “The self-regulating mechanisms of the carbon cycle can cope with the present influx of carbon of fossil origin.”³

Yet the theory that atmospheric CO₂ variations could change the climate was never altogether forgotten. An idea so simple on the face of it, an idea advanced (however briefly) by outstanding figures like Arrhenius and Chamberlin, had to be mentioned in textbooks and review articles if only to refute it. Arrhenius’s outmoded hypothesis persisted in a ghostly afterlife.

Callendar’s Advocacy

The greenhouse warming theory found a lone advocate. In 1938 an English engineer, Guy Stewart Callendar, tried to revive the old idea. An expert on steam technology, Callendar apparently took up meteorology as a hobby to fill his spare time.⁴ Many people, looking at weather stories from the past, had been saying that a warming trend was underway. When Callendar compiled measurements of temperatures from the 19th century on, he found they

¹ Brooks (1951), p. 1016.

² Redfield (1958), 221. The atmospheric elements he addressed were oxygen and other elementary gases, not carbon.

³ Hutchinson (1948), quote p. 228; see also Hutchinson (1954), 389-90; another example: Eriksson and Welander (1956), 155.

⁴ (Obituary) (1965); Fleming (2007b).

were right. He went on to dig up and evaluate old measurements of atmospheric CO₂ concentrations. He concluded that over the past hundred years the concentration of the gas had increased by about 10%. This rise, Callendar asserted, could explain the observed warming. For he understood (perhaps from Hulburt's calculation) that even if the CO₂ in the atmosphere did already absorb all the heat radiation passing through, adding more of the gas would raise the height in the atmosphere where the crucial absorption took place. That, he calculated, would make for warming.

As for the future, Callendar estimated, on flimsy grounds, that a doubling of CO₂ could gradually bring a 2°C rise in future centuries. Aware that industrial emissions were already far greater than in Arrhenius's day, Callendar saw this warming as a matter of present interest. He hinted that over the centuries it might even trigger a shift to a self-sustaining warmer climate (which did not strike him as a bad prospect).¹ But future warming was a side issue for Callendar. Like all his predecessors, he was mainly interested in solving the mystery of the ice ages.

Callendar's publications attracted some attention, and climatology textbooks of the 1940s and 1950s routinely included a brief reference to his studies. But most meteorologists gave Callendar's idea scant credence. In the first place, they doubted that CO₂ had increased at all in the atmosphere. The old data were untrustworthy, for measurements could vary with every change of wind that brought emissions from some factory or forest. Already in the nineteenth century scientists had observed that the level of the gas rose, for example, near a flock of sheep busy exhaling the gas, and dropped in London during the inactivity of a bank holiday.² If in fact CO₂ was rising, that could only be detected by a meticulous program stretching decades into the future.³

The objections that had been raised against Arrhenius also had to be faced. Wouldn't the immense volume of the oceans absorb all the extra CO₂? Callendar countered that the thin layer of ocean surface waters would quickly saturate, and it would take thousands of years for the rest of the oceans to turn over and be fully exposed to the air.⁴ But nobody knew the actual turnover rate, and it seemed that the oceans would have time to handle any extra gases. According to a well-known estimate published in 1924, even without ocean absorption it would take 500 years for fuel combustion to double the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere.⁵

¹ Callendar (1938); see also Callendar (1940); Callendar (1939); Callendar (1949).

² For bibliography on CO₂ measurements and ideas to 1951, see Stepanova (1952); sheep: Woodman (1904); criticism: Slocum (1955); Fonselius et al. (1956); however, some evidence for a gradual increase was summarized by Junge (1958); measurements are reviewed by Bolin (1972); From and Keeling (1986).

³ E.g., it "may require a period of [data] collection of many decades to detect the real trends" according to Eriksson and Welander (1956).

⁴ Callendar (1940).

⁵ Lotka (1924).

There was also the old objection, which most scientists continued to find decisive, that the overlapping absorption bands of CO₂ and water vapor already blocked all the radiation that those molecules were capable of blocking. Callendar tried to explain that the laboratory spectral measurements were woefully incomplete. Gathering scattered observational data, he argued that there were parts of the spectrum where the CO₂ bands did not overlap with water vapor absorption.¹ Some scientists found this convincing, or at least kept an open mind on the question. But it remained the standard view that, as an official U.S. Weather Bureau publication put it, the masking of CO₂ absorption by water vapor was a “fatal blow” to the CO₂ theory. Therefore, said this authority, “no probable increase in atmospheric CO₂ could materially affect” the balance of radiation.²

Most damaging of all, Callendar’s calculations of the greenhouse effect temperature rise, like Arrhenius’s, ignored much of the real world’s physics. For example, as one critic pointed out immediately, he only calculated how heat would be shuttled through the atmosphere by radiation, ignoring the crucial energy transport by convection as heated air rose from the surface (this deficiency would haunt greenhouse calculations through the next quarter-century). Worse, any rise in temperature would allow the air to hold more moisture, which would probably mean more clouds that would reflect sunlight and thus preserve the natural balance. Callendar admitted that the actual climate change would depend on interactions involving changes of cloud cover and other processes that no scientist of the time could reliably calculate.

Few thought it worthwhile to speculate about such dubious questions, where data were rudimentary and theory was no more than hand-waving. Better to rest with the widespread conviction that the atmosphere was a stable, automatically self-regulated system. The notion that humanity could permanently change global climate was implausible on the face of it, hardly worth a scientist’s attention.³

The scientists who brushed aside Callendar’s claims were reasoning well enough. (Subsequent work has shown that the temperature rise up to 1940 was, as his critics thought, mainly caused by some kind of natural cyclical effect, not by the still relatively low CO₂ emissions. And the physics of radiation and climate was indeed too poorly known at that time to show whether adding more gas could make much difference.) Yet if Callendar was mistaken when he insisted he could prove global warming had arrived, it was a fortunate mistake.

Research by definition is done at the frontier of ignorance. Like nearly everyone described in these essays, Callendar had to use intuition as well as logic to draw any conclusions at all from the murky data and theories at his disposal. Like nearly everyone, he argued for conclusions that mingled the true with the false, leaving it to later workers to peel away the bad parts. While he

¹ Callendar (1941).

² Russell (1941), 94.

³ Critic: G.C. Simpson. For additional discussion and references, see Fleming (2007b); Wearth (1997).

could not prove that greenhouse effect warming was underway, he had given sound reasons to reconsider the question. We owe much to Callendar's courage. His claims rescued the idea of global warming from obscurity and thrust it into the marketplace of scientific ideas. Not everyone dismissed his claims. Their very uncertainty attracted scientific curiosity.

The Theory Restored (1950-1958)

The complacent view that CO₂ from human activity could never become a problem was overturned during the 1950s by a series of costly observations. This was a consequence of the Second World War and the Cold War, which brought a new urgency to many fields of research. American scientists enjoyed massively increased government funding, notably from military agencies. The officials were not aiming to answer academic questions about future climates, but to provide for pressing military needs. Almost anything that happened in the atmosphere and oceans could be important for national security. Among the first products of these research efforts were new data for the absorption of infrared radiation, a topic of more interest to weapons engineers than meteorologists.

The early experiments that sent radiation through gases in a tube, measuring bands of the spectrum at sea-level pressure and temperature, had been misleading. The bands seen at sea level were actually made up of overlapping spectral lines, which in the primitive early instruments had been smeared out into broad bands. Improved physics theory and precise laboratory measurements in the 1940s and after encouraged a new way of looking at the absorption. Scientists were especially struck to find that at low pressure and temperature, each band resolved into a cluster of sharply defined lines, like a picket fence, with gaps between the lines where radiation would get through.¹ As Hulburt and Callendar had claimed, the most important CO₂ absorption lines did not lie exactly on top of water vapor lines. Instead of two overlapping bands, there were two sets of narrow lines with spaces for radiation to slip through. So even if water vapor in the lower layers of the atmosphere did entirely block any radiation that could have been absorbed by CO₂, that would not keep the gas from making a difference in the rarified and frigid upper layers. Those layers held very little water vapor anyway. And scientists were coming to see that you couldn't just calculate absorption for radiation passing through the atmosphere as a whole, you had to understand what happened in each layer—which was far harder to calculate.

Digital computers were now at hand for such calculations. The theoretical physicist Lewis D. Kaplan decided it was worth taking some time away from what seemed like more important matters to grind through extensive numerical computations. In 1952, he showed that in the upper atmosphere, adding more CO₂ must change the balance of radiation.²

¹ Martin and Baker (1932); for review, see Smith et al. (1968), pp. 476-483.

² Kaplan (1952); for other workers see, e.g., Möller (1951), pp. 46-47.

But would adding carbon dioxide in the upper layers of the air significantly change the surface temperature? Only detailed computations, point by point across the infrared spectrum and layer by layer down through the atmosphere, could answer that question. By 1956, such computations could be carried out thanks to the increasing power of digital computers. The physicist Gilbert N. Plass took up the challenge of calculating the transmission of radiation through the atmosphere (he too did it out of sheer curiosity, as a diversion from his regular work making calculations for weapon engineers). He nailed down the likelihood that adding more CO₂ would increase the interference with infrared radiation. Going beyond this qualitative result, Plass calculated that doubling the level would bring a 3-4°C rise. Assuming that emissions would continue at the current (1950s) rate, he expected that human activity would raise the average global temperature “at the rate of 1.1 degree C per century.”¹

The computation, like Callendar’s, paid no attention to possible changes in water vapor and clouds, and overall was too crude to convince scientists. “It is almost certain,” one authority scolded, “that these figures will be subject to many strong revisions.”² Yet Plass had proved one central point: it was a mistake to dismiss the greenhouse effect with spectroscopic arguments. He warned that climate change could be “a serious problem to future generations”—although not for several centuries. Following the usual pattern, Plass was mainly interested in the way variations in CO₂ might solve the mystery of the ice ages. “If at the end of this century the average temperature has continued to rise,” he wrote, then it would be “firmly established” that CO₂ could cause climate change.³

None of this work met the argument that the oceans would promptly absorb nearly all the CO₂ humanity might emit. Plass had estimated that gas added to the atmosphere would stay there for a thousand years. Equally plausible estimates suggested that the surface waters of the oceans would absorb it in a matter of days.⁴ Fortunately, scientists could now track the movements of carbon with a new tool: carbon-14.

This radioactive isotope was produced abundantly in the fallout from nuclear weapon tests during the 1950s. Sensitive instruments could detect even a tiny amount carried thousands of miles on the world’s winds, and the data provided the first comprehensive mapping of the global circulation of air. The results confirmed what had only been guessed: within a few years any addition of CO₂ was well mixed throughout the atmosphere, from pole to pole and from the surface into the highest stratosphere.⁵

¹ Plass (1956b); see also Plass (1956c).

² Rossby (1959), p. 14; the chief critic was Kaplan (1960).

³ Plass (1956d), quotes on 306, 311, 315, 316; see also Plass (1959); Plass (1956e); Plass (1956a).

⁴ Plass (1956a); Dingle (1954).

⁵ Edwards (2010) has discussion and references.

Carbon-14 is also created by cosmic rays in the upper atmosphere and then decays over millennia. The carbon in ancient coal and oil is so old that it entirely lacks the radioactive isotope. Therefore emissions from burning fossil fuels would add only plain carbon to the atmosphere. In 1955, the chemist Hans Suess reported an analysis of wood from trees grown over the past century, finding that the newer the wood, the higher its ratio of plain carbon to carbon-14. He had detected an increase of fossil carbon in the atmosphere.

The amount of fossil carbon that Suess saw added to the atmosphere was barely one percent, a fraction so low that he concluded that the oceans were indeed taking up most of the carbon that came from burning fossil fuels. A decade would pass before he reported more accurate studies, which showed a far higher fraction of fossil carbon. Yet already in 1955 it was evident that Suess's data were preliminary and insecure. The important thing he had demonstrated was that fossil carbon really was showing up in the atmosphere. More work on carbon-14 should tell just how carbon was circulating in the planetary system.¹

Suess took up the problem in collaboration with Roger Revelle at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, California. (Some other carbon-14 experts attacked the topic independently, all reaching much the same conclusions.) From measurements of how much of the isotope was found in the air and how much in sea water, they calculated the movements of CO₂. It turned out that the ocean surface waters took up a typical molecule of CO₂ from the atmosphere within a decade or so. Measurements of the travels of radioactive carbon from bomb tests meanwhile showed that the oceans turned over completely in several hundred years (an estimate soon confirmed by evidence from other studies).² At first sight that seemed fast enough to sweep any extra CO₂ into the depths.

But Revelle had been studying the chemistry of the oceans through his entire career, and he knew that the seas are not just salt water but a complex stew of chemicals. These chemicals create a peculiar buffering mechanism that stabilizes the acidity of sea water. The mechanism had been known for decades, but Revelle now realized that it would prevent the water from retaining all the extra CO₂ it took up. A careful look showed that the surface layer could not really absorb much additional gas—barely one-tenth the amount a naïve calculation would have predicted.

A supplementary essay on Revelle's Discovery tells this crucial story in full, as a detailed example of the complex interactions often found in geophysical research.

Revelle did not at first recognize the full significance of his work. He made a calculation in which he assumed that industry would emit CO₂ at a constant rate (like most people at the time, he scarcely grasped how explosively population and industry were rising). This gave a

¹ Suess (1955); see also Suess (1953); a confirmation: Münnich (1957); Revision: Houtermans et al. (1967), see p. 68.

² Revelle and Suess (1957); Craig (1957a); Arnold and Anderson (1957).

prediction that the concentration in the air would level off after a few centuries, with an increase of no more than 40%. Revelle did note that greenhouse effect warming “may become significant during future decades if industrial fuel combustion continues to rise exponentially.” He also wrote that “Human beings are now carrying out a large scale geophysical experiment of a kind that could not have happened in the past nor be reproduced in the future.”¹

As sometimes happens with landmark scientific papers, written in haste while understanding just begins to dawn, Revelle’s explanation was hard to grasp. Other scientists failed to see the point that was obscurely buried in the calculations, and continued to deny there was a greenhouse effect problem. In 1958, when Callendar published a paper to insist once again that CO₂ observations showed a steady rise from the 19th century, he noted Revelle’s paper but still confessed that he did not understand why “the oceans have not been accepting additional CO₂ on anything like the accepted scale.”² Finally in 1959 two meteorologists in Sweden, Bert Bolin and Erik Eriksson, caught on. They explained the sea water buffering clearly—so clearly that during the next few years, some scientists cited Bolin and Eriksson’s paper for this decisive insight rather than Revelle and Suess’s (only in later years was Revelle always cited for the discovery).³ The central insight was that although sea water did rapidly absorb CO₂, most of the added gas would promptly evaporate back into the air before the slow oceanic circulation swept it into the abyss. To be sure, the chemistry of air and sea water would eventually reach an equilibrium—but that could take thousands of years. Arrhenius had not concerned himself with time-scales shorter than that, but geoscientists in the 1950s did.

Keeling’s Curve

In the late 1950s a few American scientists, starting with Plass, tentatively began to inform the public that greenhouse gases might become a problem within the foreseeable future. Revelle in particular warned journalists and government officials that greenhouse warming deserved serious attention. The stakes were revealed when Bolin and Eriksson pursued the consequences of their calculation to the end. They assumed industrial production would climb exponentially, and figured that atmospheric CO₂ would rise some 25% by the year 2000. That was a far swifter rise than anyone before had suggested. As the *New York Times* reported in a brief note, Bolin suggested that the effect on climate “might be radical.”⁴ In 1962, a still stronger (although also little heeded) warning was sounded by the Russian climate expert Mikhail Budyko. His

¹ Revelle and Suess (1957), pp. 18-20, 26.

² Callendar (1958), p. 246. Here Callendar was one of those who quickly picked up Revelle’s “geophysical experiment” phrase. A typical denial of any future greenhouse effect problem was Bray (1959), see p. 228.

³ Bolin and Eriksson (1959); example of paper citing Bolin and Eriksson but not Revelle: Mitchell (1961), p. 243; review citing them: Skirrow (1965), pp. 282-84, 308.

⁴ Meeting of National Academy of Sciences described in “Experts Discuss Monsters of the Sea,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1959; my thanks to Richard Somerville for pointing this out.

calculations of the exponential growth of industrial civilization suggested a drastic global warming within the next century or so.

Once meteorologists understood that ocean uptake was slow, they found it possible that CO₂ levels had been rising, just as Callendar insisted.¹ Yet it was only a possibility, for the measurements were all dubious. By the mid 1950s, researchers were saying that it was important to measure, much more accurately, the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere.² A Scandinavian group accordingly set up a network of 15 measuring stations in their countries. Their only finding, however, was a high noise level. Their measurements apparently fluctuated from day to day as different air masses passed through, with differences between stations as high as a factor of two. Only much later was it recognized that their methods of analyzing the air had been inadequate, and responsible for much of the noise.³ A leading authority summarized the scientific opinion of the late 1950s: “it seems almost hopeless to arrive at reliable estimates [of CO₂]... by such measurements in limited areas.” To find if the gas level was changing, measurements would have to “be made concurrently and during a great number of years” at many locations.⁴

Charles David (Dave) Keeling held a different view. As he pursued local measurements of the gas in California, he saw that it might be possible to hunt down and remove the sources of noise. Technical advances in infrared instrumentation allowed an order of magnitude improvement over previous techniques for measuring gases like CO₂. Taking advantage of that, however, would require many costly and exceedingly meticulous measurements, carried out someplace far from disturbances. Most scientists, looking at the large and apparently unavoidable fluctuations in the raw data, thought such precision irrelevant and the instrumentation too expensive. But Revelle and Suess happened to have enough funds to hire Keeling to measure CO₂ with precision.

A supplementary essay tells the precarious story of Keeling's funding and monitoring of CO₂ levels as a detailed example of how essential research and measurements might be fed—or starved.

Revelle's simple aim was to establish a baseline “snapshot” of CO₂ values around the world, averaging over the large variations he expected to see from place to place and from time to time. After a couple of decades, somebody could come back, take another snapshot, and see if the average CO₂ concentration had risen. Keeling did much better than that with his new instruments. With painstaking series of measurements in the pristine air of Antarctica and high atop the Mauna Loa volcano in Hawaii, he nailed down precisely a stable baseline level of CO₂

¹ e.g., Mitchell (1961).

² Eriksson (1954).

³ Fonselius et al. (1955); Fonselius et al. (1956); for critique, see From and Keeling (1986), p. 88, and passim for history of CO₂ measurements generally; also Keeling (1998), p. 43.

⁴ Rossby (1959), p. 15; this is a translation of Rossby (1956).

in the atmosphere. In 1960, with only two full years of Antarctic data in hand, Keeling reported that this baseline level had risen. The rate of the rise was approximately what would be expected if the oceans were not swallowing up most industrial emissions.¹

Lack of funds soon closed down the Antarctic station, but Keeling managed to keep the Mauna Loa measurements going with only a short hiatus. As the CO₂ record extended it became increasingly impressive, each year noticeably higher. Soon Keeling's curve, jagged but inexorably rising, was widely cited by scientific review panels and science journalists. It became the primary icon of the greenhouse effect.

Carbon Dioxide as the Key to Climate Change? (1960s-1970s)

New carbon-14 measurements were giving scientists solid data to chew on. Researchers began to work out just how carbon moves through its many forms in the air, ocean, minerals, soils, and living creatures. They plugged their data into simple models, with boxes representing each reservoir of carbon (ocean surface waters, plants, etc.), and arrows showing the exchanges of CO₂ among the reservoirs. The final goal of most researchers was to figure out how much of the CO₂ produced by human activity was sinking into the oceans, or perhaps was being absorbed by vegetation. But along the way there were many curious puzzles, which forced researchers to make inquiries among experts in far distant fields.

During the 1960s, these tentative contacts among almost entirely separate research communities developed into ongoing interchanges. Scientists who studied biological cycles of elements such as nitrogen and carbon (typically supported by forestry and agriculture interests) got in touch with, among others, geochemists (typically in academic retreats like the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, California). This emerging carbon-cycle community began to talk with atmospheric scientists who pursued interests in weather prediction (typically at government-funded laboratories like the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, or the Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory in Princeton, New Jersey). One valuable example of this crossover of interests was a calculation published by Princeton computer specialists in 1967. They had managed to produce a model that simulated something roughly like the actual climate of the planet, with deserts and sea ice and trade winds in all the right places. Out of curiosity they doubled the amount of CO₂ in their simulated atmosphere. The simulated global temperature rose a couple of degrees.²

Even before that, in 1965, a prestigious group of scientists had suggested with noteworthy foresight that "By the year 2000 the increase in atmospheric CO₂... may be sufficient to produce measurable and perhaps marked changes in climate." But most scientists at this time were

¹ The paper also described the seasonal cycle of CO₂ emissions. Keeling (1960); in the 1970s, it was found that the 1959-1960 rise had been exaggerated by an unusual natural release of the gas related to an El Niño event. Keeling (1998); for the history, see also Keeling (1978).

² Manabe and Wetherald (1967).

scarcely concerned about CO₂ as an agent of future climate change. They addressed the gas as simply one component in their study of biological, oceanographic or meteorological systems.¹ Most stuck with the old assumption that the Earth's geochemistry was dominated by stable mineral processes, operating on a planetary scale over millions of years. People did not easily grasp how sensitive the Earth's atmosphere was to biological forces—the totality of the planet's living activity—to say nothing of the fraction of that activity affected by humanity.

Leading scientists continued to doubt that anyone needed to worry at all about the greenhouse effect. The veteran climate expert Helmut Landsberg stressed in a 1970 review that little was known about how humans might change the climate. At worst, he thought, the rise of CO₂ at the current rate might bring a 2°C temperature rise over the next 400 years, which “can hardly be called cataclysmic.”² Meanwhile Hubert H. Lamb, the outstanding compiler of old climate data, wrote that the effects of CO₂ were “doubtful... there are many uncertainties.” The CO₂ theory, he pointed out, failed to account for the numerous large shifts that he had uncovered in records of climate from medieval times to the present. Many agreed with Lamb that a “rather sharp decline” of global temperature that had been observed since the 1940s put the whole matter in question.³

At this time research on changes in the atmosphere's CO₂ had been, almost by definition, identical to research on the greenhouse effect. But in the late 1970s and early 1980s, calculations found that methane and other gases emitted by human activities could have a greenhouse effect that was sometimes molecule for molecule tens or hundreds of times greater than CO₂. Nevertheless most of the scientific interest continued to revolve around CO₂.

Up to this point I have described a central core of research on the effects of CO₂ on climate—research that before the 1970s scarcely interacted with other subjects. During the 1970s, the greenhouse effect became a major topic in many overlapping fields. Scientists eventually determined that a bit over half of the effect of humans on climate change is due to emissions of CO₂ (mainly from fossil fuels but also from deforestation and cement manufacture). The rest of the effect is due to methane and other gases emitted by human activities; atmospheric pollution by smoke and dust; and changes in land use such as replacing dark forest with sunlight-reflecting crops or desert. These factors are discussed in other topical essays (especially those on Other Greenhouse Gases, Aerosols and The Biosphere). The remainder of this essay covers only the developments most directly related to the gas CO₂ itself.

Most of the scientific interest in climate change continued to revolve around CO₂. Carbon cycle studies proliferated. A major stimulus was a controversy that erupted in the early 1970s and stubbornly resisted resolution. National economic statistics yielded reliable figures for how

¹ President's Science Advisory Committee (1965); Hart and Victor (1993), passim.

² Landsberg (1970).

³ Lamb (1969), p. 245.

much CO₂ humanity put into the air each year from burning fossil fuels. The measurements of the annual increase by Keeling and others showed that less than half of the new carbon could be found in the atmosphere. Where was the rest? Oceanographers calculated how much of the gas the oceans took up, while other scientists calculated how much the biosphere took up or emitted. The numbers didn't add up—some of the carbon was “missing.” Plainly, scientists did not understand important parts of the carbon cycle. Looking at large-scale climate changes, such as between ice ages and warm periods, they turned up a variety of possible interactions with climate involving plant life and ocean chemistry. The papers addressing these topics became increasingly complex.

Some scientists took up the old argument that fertilization of plant life by additional CO₂, together with uptake by the oceans, would keep the level of gas from rising too sharply. Keeling, however, warned that by the middle of the next century, plants could well reach their limit in taking up carbon (as every gardener knows, beyond some point more fertilizer is useless or even harmful). Further, there would eventually be so much CO₂ in the ocean surface waters that the oceans would not be able to absorb additional gas as rapidly as at present.¹ Keeling kept refining and improving his measurements of the CO₂ level in the atmosphere to extract more information. The curve did not climb smoothly, but stuttered through seasonal cycle, plus mysterious spells of faster and slower growth. It was only over a long term, say a decade, that the rise was clearly as inexorable as a tide.² Meanwhile, computer models were coming into better agreement on the future warming to be expected from increased CO₂. And global temperatures began to rise again. It was getting increasingly difficult for scientists to believe that the greenhouse effect was no cause for worry.

How would we know if we should take action to avert dangerous climate change? In 1981 a couple of experienced climate scientists reviewed the predictions of the best computer models, and compared them with the natural fluctuations of climate observed in the past. Their conclusion: “The effects of CO₂ may not be detectable until around the turn of the century. By this time, atmospheric CO₂ concentration will probably have become sufficiently high (and we will be committed to further increases) that a climatic change significantly larger than any which has occurred in the past century could be unavoidable. To avert such change it is possible that decisions will have to be made (for example, to reduce anthropogenic CO₂ emissions) some time before unequivocal observational ‘proof’ of the effects of CO₂ on climate is available.”³

Evidence from the Ice

Concerns were sharpened by new evidence from holes arduously drilled into the Greenland and Antarctic ice caps. The long cylinders of ice extracted by the drills contained tiny bubbles with

¹ The partial pressure of CO₂ in sea water would grow and the chemical buffering would change. Keeling (1973), p. 291.

² E.g., Keeling et al. (1976).

³ Wigley and Jones (1981), p. 208.

samples of ancient air—by good fortune there was this one thing on the planet that preserved CO₂ intact. Group after group cut samples from cores of ice in hopes of measuring the level. For two decades, every attempt failed to give consistent and plausible results. Finally reliable methods were developed. The trick was to clean an ice sample scrupulously, crush it in a vacuum, and quickly measure what came out. In 1980, a team published findings that were definite, unexpected, and momentous.

In the depths of the last ice age, the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere had been as much as 50% lower than in our own warmer times. (These Greenland measurements were later called into question, but the dramatically lower ice-age level was quickly confirmed by other studies.)¹ Pushing forward, by 1985 a French-Soviet drilling team at Vostok Station in central Antarctica had produced an ice core two kilometers long that carried a 150,000-year record, a complete ice age cycle of warmth, cold and warmth. They found that the level of atmospheric CO₂ had gone up and down in remarkably close step with temperature.²

The Vostok core, an ice driller declared, “turned the tide in the greenhouse gas controversy.”³ At the least it nailed down what one expert called an “emerging consensus that CO₂ is an important component in the system of climatic feedbacks.” More generally, he added, it showed that further progress would “require treating climate and the carbon cycle as parts of the same global system rather than as separate entities.”⁴ The rise and fall of temperature was tied up in a complex way with interlocking global cycles involving not just the mineral geochemistry of CO₂ in air and sea water, but also methane emissions, the growth and decay of forests and bogs, changes of the plankton population in the oceans, and still more features of the planet’s biosphere.

All through these decades, a few geologists had continued to pursue the original puzzle raised by Tyndall and Chamberlin—had changes of CO₂ been responsible for the greatest of climate changes? These were the vast slow swings, lasting tens of millions of years, between eras like the age of dinosaurs with summer-like climates almost from pole to pole, and eras like our own when continental ice caps waxed and waned. There was no consensus about the causes of these grand shifts, and nobody had found a way to reliably measure the atmosphere many millions of years back. Nevertheless, by the 1980s, scientists turned up evidence suggesting that CO₂ levels had been elevated during the great warm eras of the past.

Lines of thinking converged to emphasize the importance of the greenhouse effect. For decades geologists had been puzzled by a calculation that astrophysicists insisted was indisputable: the Sun had been dimmer when the Earth was young. Billions of years ago the oceans would have been permanently frozen, if not for high CO₂ levels. Astrophysical theory showed that as the

¹ Berner et al. (1980); Delmas et al. (1980); Neftel et al. (1982); Shackleton et al. (1983).

² Lorius et al. (1985); see also Barnola et al. (1987); Genthon et al. (1987).

³ Mayewski and White (2002), pp. 39, 77.

⁴ Sundquist (1987).

Sun had consumed its nuclear fuel it had gradually grown brighter, yet somehow the Earth's temperature had remained neither too cold nor too hot to sustain life. The best guess was that CO₂ acted as a thermostat for the planet. Volcanoes presumably put the gas into the atmosphere at a fairly constant rate. But chemical processes run faster at higher temperatures, so on a warmer Earth the weathering of rocks would take up CO₂ faster. As the rocks erode, rivers carry the soil into the seas, where the carbon eventually winds up in compounds deposited on the seabed. Thus a rough self-sustaining balance is maintained among the forces of volcanic emissions, greenhouse warming, weathering, and ocean uptake.¹ To be sure, the system might take thousands if not millions of years to stabilize after some great disturbance.

Such great disturbances—even a totally glaciated “snowball Earth”—were not a fantasy of oversimplified models. Geologists turned up evidence that more than half a billion years ago the oceans had actually frozen over, if not entirely then mostly. That seemed impossible, for how could the Earth have escaped the trap and warmed up again? There was at least one obvious way (but it was only obvious once someone thought of it, which took decades). Over many thousands of years, volcanoes would have continued to inject CO₂ into the atmosphere. There the gas would have accumulated, since it could not get into the frozen seas. Eventually a colossal greenhouse effect might have melted the ice.² The planet Venus, on the other hand, seemed to have suffered a runaway greenhouse catastrophe: a surface that might once have been only a little warmer than the Earth's had heated up enough to evaporate the carbon in the rocks into the atmosphere as ever more CO₂ was created, making the planet a hellish furnace. All this was speculative, and proved little about our future climate. But it added to the gathering conviction that CO₂ was the very keystone of the planet's climate system—a system by no means as cozily stable as it appeared.

Another unusual disturbance had begun. The proof was in the Vostok team's 1987 report of their analysis of ice cores reaching back through the entire previous glacial period and into the warm time before. (And the drill was still only partway down; by the time they stopped drilling a dozen years later, the team had recovered ice going back 400,000 years, through four complete glacial cycles.) The CO₂ levels in their record got as low as 180 parts per million in the cold periods and reached 280 in the warm periods, never higher.³ But in the air above the ice, the level of the gas had reached 350—far above anything seen in this geological era. It was still climbing exponentially, at a rate that doubled every 30-35 years.

¹ Walker et al. (1981).

² Also, the discovery in the late 1970s that life is sustained at hot springs in the deep ocean showed that the continuous fossil record of sea life did not rule out the possibility that the oceans had frozen. Studies include Berner et al. (1983); Kasting and Ackerman (1986); for review, Crowley and North (1991); more recently, Hoffmann et al. (1998); the term “snowball Earth” was coined by Joseph Kirschvink: Kirschvink (1992); earlier Manabe called it “White Earth” according to Gleick (1987), p. 332; for references and popular-level discussion, see Ward and Brownlee (2000).

³ Genthon et al. (1987); Petit et al. (1999).

Time Lags and Feedbacks (1990s)

During the 1990s, further ice core measurements indicated that during past glacial periods, temperature changes had *preceded* CO₂ changes by several centuries. Some scientists doubted that dates could be measured so precisely, but as better cores were extracted the data increasingly pointed to a time lag.¹ This surprised and confused many people. If changes in CO₂ lagged behind changes in temperature, didn't that contradict the greenhouse theory of global warming? But in fact the lag was not good news.

It seemed that rises or falls in carbon dioxide levels had not initiated the glacial cycles. In fact most scientists had long since abandoned that hypothesis. In the 1960s, painstaking studies had shown that subtle shifts in our planet's orbit around the Sun (called "Milankovitch cycles") matched the timing of ice ages with startling precision. The amount of sunlight that fell in a given latitude and season varied predictably over millenia. As some had pointed out ever since the 19th century, in times when sunlight fell more strongly on northern latitudes in the spring, snow and sea ice would not linger so long; the dark earth and seawater would absorb more sunlight, and get warmer. However, calculations showed that this subtle effect should cause no more than a small regional warming. How could almost imperceptible changes in the angle of sunlight cause entire continental ice sheets to build up and melt away?

The new ice cores suggested that a powerful feedback amplified the changes in sunlight. The crucial fact was that a slight warming would cause the level of greenhouse gases to rise slightly. For one thing, warmer oceans would evaporate out more gas. For another, as the vast Arctic tundras warmed up, the bogs would emit more CO₂ (and another greenhouse gas, methane, also measured in the ice with a lag behind temperature). The greenhouse effect of these gases would raise the temperature a little more, which would cause more emission of gases, which would... and so forth, hauling the planet step by step into a warm period. Many thousands of years later, the process would reverse when the sunlight falling in key latitudes weakened. Bogs and oceans would absorb greenhouse gases, ice would build up, and the planet would slide back into an ice age. This finally explained how tiny shifts in the Earth's orbit could set the timing of the enormous swings of glacial cycles.

Or, more ominously, how a change in the gas level initiated by humanity might be amplified through a temperature feedback loop. The ancient ice ages were the reverse of our current situation, where humanity was initiating the change by adding greenhouse gases. As the gas level rose, temperature would rise with a time lag—although only a few decades, not centuries, for the rates of change were now enormously faster than the orbital shifts that brought ice ages.

¹ Shackleton (2000); changes of CO₂ preceding changes in ice sheet volume were reported in Shackleton and Pisias (1985).

There were many ways temperature or other climate features could influence the carbon dioxide level one way or another. Perhaps variations of temperature and weather patterns had caused land vegetation to release extra CO₂ or take it up... perhaps the oceans were involved through massive changes in their circulation or ice cover... or through changes in their CO₂-absorbing plankton, which would bloom or decline insofar as they were fertilized by minerals, which reached them from dusty winds, rivers, and ocean upwelling, all of which could change with the climate... or perhaps there were still more complicated and obscure effects. Into the 21st century, scientists kept finding new ways that warming would push more of the gas into the atmosphere. As one of them remarked, “it is difficult to explain the demise of the ice sheets without the added heating from CO₂ ... this gas has killed ice sheets in the past and may do so again.”¹

A key point stood out. The cycling of carbon through living systems was not something to trifle with. In the network of feedbacks that made up the climate system, CO₂ was a potent amplifier. This did not prove by itself that the greenhouse effect was responsible for the warming seen in the 20th century. And it did not say how much warming the rise of CO₂ might bring in the future. What was now beyond doubt was that the greenhouse effect had to be taken very seriously indeed.²

The Computer Models Vindicated (1990s-2000s)

By now there were a dozen teams around the world using computers to integrate every advance in observation or theory. As the 21st century arrived, the growing agreement among the rival teams, and the consistency of their models’ results with many different kinds of observations, became overwhelmingly convincing. No model that could simulate the Earth’s climate—and some of the simulations had become very good indeed—failed to show warming if its greenhouse gas level was raised. Scarcely any expert with a record of contributing to climate science now doubted that CO₂ and other greenhouse gases were at least partly responsible for the unprecedented warming all around the world since the 1970s.

A final nail in the coffin of scientific skepticism came in 2005, when a team compiled accurate long-term measurements of temperatures in all the world’s ocean basins. It was not in the air but the massive oceans, after all, that most of any heat added would soon wind up. Indeed natural fluctuations had kept air temperatures roughly the same since the late 1990s; the significant question was whether the oceans were continuing to warm. The team found that over many decades the planet’s content of heat-energy had been rising, and was rising still (this continued steadily after 2005 as well). There was only one remotely plausible source of the colossal addition of energy: the Earth must be taking in more energy from sunlight than it was radiating back into space. Simple physics calculated that to heat all that sea water required

¹Severinghaus (2009), with a good discussion of some amplification effects.

²Petit et al. (1999); IPCC (2001), p. 202; Lorius et al. (1990); Pälike et al. (2006) (detecting the carbon cycle feedback over millions of years).

nearly an extra watt per square meter, averaged over the planet's entire surface, year after year. The number was just what the elaborate greenhouse effect computations had been predicting for decades. James Hansen, leader of one of the studies, called the visible increase of the planet's heat content a "smoking gun" proof of greenhouse effect warming. Moreover, in each separate ocean basin there was a close match between the pattern of rising temperatures measured at each location and depth and detailed model calculations of where the greenhouse effect warming should appear. Warming from other sources, for example a change in the Sun's output, could not produce these patterns. Evidently the modelers were on the right track.¹

Yet amid all the uncertainties about how carbon cycles operated, how much could we trust the computer models to work under circumstances different from the present? Scientists are more likely to believe something if they can confirm it with entirely independent lines of evidence, preferably from somewhere nobody had looked before. Just such new evidence came up in the 1990s, thanks to an unexpected alliance of paleontology and plant physiology. Studies of plant species that had changed little since the rise of the dinosaurs (magnolia for one) showed that if you exposed them to a higher level of CO₂, the structure of their leaves changed. Ancient fossil leaves showed just such changes. Several kinds of chemical studies of ancient rocks and soils helped pin down how the level of the gas had swung widely over geological ages, and the temperature too.

Eventually geochemists and their allies managed to get numbers for the "climate sensitivity" in past eras, that is, the response of temperature to a rise in the CO₂ level. Over hundreds of millions of years, a doubled level of the gas had always gone along with a temperature rise of three degrees, give or take a degree or two. That was in startling agreement with the range of numbers coming from many computer studies. Evidently the computer modelers had not missed something huge.

It was reassuring that there seemed scant possibility of a Venus-style runaway greenhouse apocalypse. It was less reassuring to see what the climate had looked like in the ancient eras when CO₂ had stood at a high level—a level that humanity would eventually reach if we went on burning all available oil and coal. The Earth had been virtually a different planet, with tropical forests near the poles and sea levels a hundred meters higher. To be sure, it would take many thousands of years to melt entire polar ice caps. But in the meantime even a modest sea level rise would disrupt humanity's teeming coastal populations. And as many scientists pointed out, if humanity's emissions continued they seemed bound to bring not only "a warming unprecedented in the past million years," but changes "much faster than previously experienced by natural ecosystems..."²

¹ Barnett et al. (2005); Hansen et al. (2005).

² A recent review was Royer et al. (2007). Among many references: Berner (1991)(geochemical); Cerling (1991) (carbon in soils); McElwain and Chaloner (1995) (leaves); Royer et al. (2001); Hoffert and Covey (1992), quote p. 576.

By 2010, new studies had pinned down some truly disturbing numbers about eras in the distant past when CO₂ levels had been high—although no higher than we would reach by the late 21st century if emissions continued to rise without restriction. In those eras global temperatures had been at least three degrees higher than at present, and perhaps as much as six degrees higher, that is, in the upper range of what computer models found plausible, if not higher still. For the real planet, a rise in temperature had evidently not been limited by increased cloud reflection or the like. The rise had instead apparently been amplified by positive feedbacks, as ice and oceans and vegetation responded over centuries to the changing conditions with darker surfaces and their own gas emissions. The computer models did not take these slow feedback loops into account. Hansen and others argued that humanity risked setting off a chain reaction that would eventually bring an altogether catastrophic planetary change.¹

In the first decade of the 21st century, international panels of experts reviewed the evidence; and announced conclusions that were checked by virtually all the major national science academies, scientific societies, government science agencies and other bodies representative of scientific expertise. All these bodies agreed that the world faced a serious problem; all recommended that governments adopt strict policies to restrict greenhouse gas emissions. (All, that is, except a few self-appointed panels composed primarily of people with limited expertise in climate science, representing ideological and business interests that opposed all forms of government regulation.) Individual climate scientists, while almost unanimously in agreement with the consensus in its broad outlines, continued to argue vehemently over details, as always in frontier research. Critics pounced on every apparent discrepancy. They published long lists of scientists who denied there was any problem—although the lists included hardly any scientist who had made significant contributions to climate research.² Debate over policies to restrict emissions grew increasingly intense.

Prospects for the 21st Century

Through all these discoveries and controversies, Keeling and his colleagues had kept on quietly monitoring and analyzing the ongoing changes in atmospheric CO₂ levels. Since the 1980s, a

¹ On positive feedbacks see Matthews and Keith (2007) and Tripathi et al. (2009) (for mid Miocene); Hansen et al. (2008), popular version: Hansen (2009), ch. 8; on mid Pliocene conditions, Pagani et al. (2010) and Lunt et al. (2010). Breecker et al. (2010) offer new evidence on fossil soil chemistry showing that “past greenhouse climates were accompanied by concentrations [of CO₂] similar to those projected for A.D. 2100”. Another view: Kiehl (2011).

² In a poll of scientists in different fields by Doran and Kendall Zimmerman (2009), 97% of those who published at least half of their peer-reviewed research in the climate field agreed that human activity was significant in changing global temperature; at the other extreme, only 47% of economic geologists (typically employed by oil companies and the like) concurred. Anderegg et al. (2010) similarly found that 97% of actively publishing climate scientists went along with the international panels’ consensus.

cooperative international program had been measuring the gas at land stations around the world and along shipping lanes. The baseline continued to rise ominously, but not smoothly. There had been years when the world's atmosphere had gained one billion metric tonnes of the gas, while in other years it gained as much as six billion. How much did changes in the world's industries and agricultural practices affect the rate of the rise? Economic statistics allowed a good reckoning of how much gas humanity emitted in burning fossil fuels—and also of some significance, in the manufacture of cement—but the effects of deforestation and other land use changes were not so easy to figure.

Beyond that, how much did changes in the level of CO₂ reflect changes in the growth or decay of plants, perhaps related to climate fluctuations? What could one learn from the way the curve reacted to temporary climate changes brought on by volcanic eruptions, by the El Niño events that temporarily pumped heat in or out of the Pacific Ocean, and so forth?¹ Further clues came from world-wide measurements of other biologically active gases, especially oxygen (the exacting techniques for measuring the tiny variations were pioneered by Keeling's son, Ralph Keeling). Most of the “missing” carbon was finally located, with gradually increasing precision, in rapidly changing forests, soils, and other biological reservoirs.

Another marker of biological activity was the rare isotope carbon-13. Plants take less of it from the atmosphere than the lighter isotope carbon-12, so the latter is over-represented in coal and oil. The fraction of the lighter isotope in the air was increasing, proving (to a lingering band of skeptics) that the rise in CO₂ came from humanity's use of fossil fuel, not from a mineral source such as volcanoes.²

Meanwhile the level of CO₂ in the air kept rising, indeed faster than anyone had expected. In this essay we have seen how, ever since the late 1950s, an increasing number of experts predicted that effects on climate would become clearly visible around the year 2000. They were right. As the 21st century began, not only was the global temperature soaring in a way never seen before, but field evidence showed that the expected feedbacks were kicking in. The world's plants were taking up more CO₂, but their capacity to absorb was waning. Warmer oceans were absorbing less CO₂, and gas was seen bubbling from melting Arctic tundra.³ In sum, global warming was leading to more greenhouse emissions, which would lead to more warming... and so forth. Around 2008 some scientists began to warn that these changes were coming on faster than the international panels had predicted.

Also as predicted only sooner, the world was beginning to suffer historically unprecedented heat waves, droughts, floods and storms. The sea level was rising while mountain glaciers, the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets, and Arctic sea ice melted back, all at accelerating rates.

¹ Keeling (1998).

² Oxygen: R. Keeling et al. (1993); R. Keeling et al. (1996). C13: C. Keeling et al. (1995); Ghosh and Brand (2003); R. Keeling et al. (2010) .

³ Canadell et al. (2007).

Important ecosystems from alpine meadows to coral reefs were showing signs of stress. (*See the separate essay on Impacts of Climate Change.*) For the scientists, as one of them remarked, “Seeing their own predictions come true has been a frightening experience.”¹

Still more sobering, people were just now coming to grips with the implications of a fact that scientists had known for decades—the climate system has built-in time lags. Even if human emissions of CO₂ magically dropped to zero, the gas already in the air would linger for many centuries, trapping heat. The passionate policy controversies and even much of the scientific research had been preoccupied with the warming of a degree or two (or more?) expected by the end of the century. But global temperatures would continue to creep upward until the ocean depths reached equilibrium with the heated air, until biological systems finished adapting to the new conditions, and until Arctic icecaps melted back to their own equilibrium. Whatever we did now, humanity was already committed to centuries of violently changing weather and rising seas.² Yet emissions of greenhouse gases, far from halting, were soaring at an accelerating rate.

The basic physics and chemistry of the problems raised by Tyndall were now well in hand. There were reliable calculations of the direct effects of CO₂ on radiation, of how the gas was dissolved in sea water, and other physical phenomena. Further progress would center on understanding the complex interactions of the entire planetary system, and especially interactions with living creatures. The creatures who would count the most were humans. The climate a century hence would depend chiefly on what they chose to do about their emissions.

What would be the consequences of the global warming that was now plainly underway? This became the new center for much of the research. Extensive studies showed that the consequences of a two degree rise would be severe in many parts of the world—and such a rise was more likely than not by the late 21st century, even if governments began to take serious action to restrict greenhouse gas emissions. And if we did not act promptly and forcefully? It was even odds that by the end of the century we would face a grievous degradation of many of the ecosystems on which civilization depends. (*See the separate essay on expected impacts of global warming.*)

What can people do about global warming, and what should we do? See my Personal Note and Links.

¹ Michael Oppenheimer at Fordham University conference on climate change, New York, Jan. 25, 2008.

² Matthews and Caldeira (2008); Schmittner et al. (2008); James Hansen, privately circulated draft article on “Charney Effect” (2007). “I was struck by the fact that the warming continues much longer even after emissions have declined,” said Schmittner, quoted by Juliet Eilperin, “Carbon Output Must Near Zero To Avert Danger, New Studies Say,” *Washington Post*, March 10, 2008.

Related:

Rapid Climate Change

Impacts of Global Warming

The Modern Temperature Trend

Simple Models of Climate

Supplements:

Other Greenhouse Gases

Roger Revelle's Discovery