



Fiddling while the Planet Burns

Will the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial writers accept a challenge to learn the truth about the science of global climate change? By JEFFREY D. SACHS

Another summer of record-breaking temperatures brought power failures, heat waves, droughts and tropical storms throughout the U.S., Europe and Asia. Only one place seemed to remain cool: the air-conditioned offices of the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal*. As New York City wilted, the editors sat insouciant and comfortable, hurling editorials of stunning misdirection at their readers, continuing their irresponsible drumbeat that global warming is junk science.

Now, I have nothing against the *Wall Street Journal*. It is an excellent paper, whose science column and news reporting have accurately and carefully carried the story of global climate change. The editorial page sits in its own redoubt, separated from the reporters—and from the truth.

A July 14 editorial, “Hockey Stick Hokum,” epitomizes the problem. The climate-change “hockey stick” is a graph first published in 1998 by Michael Mann et al. that attempted to reconstruct the mean surface temperature on the planet during the period A.D. 900 to the present. The conclusion of the study was that we are now in that interval’s warmest range of temperatures, therefore adding support to the overwhelming evidence that man-made climate change is already well under way.

The *Wall Street Journal* editorial page for years has railed against these scientific findings on climate change, even as the global scientific consensus has reached nearly 100 percent, including the reports commissioned by the skeptical Bush White House. Thus, the hockey stick became the bête noire of the editorial page as well as of the dwindling “climate skeptic” community, and right-wing officials such as Representative Joe Barton of Texas, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Energy and Air Quality, took up the attack.

In response to these growing political pressures, the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences conducted a major independent scientific review and updating of the hockey stick data and analysis. It came down squarely on the side of the Mann study, stating that “the committee finds it plausible that the Northern Hemisphere was warmer during the last few decades of the 20th century than during

any comparable period over the preceding millennium.” Significant uncertainties remain for global temperatures before 1600, the NRC noted, but it emphasized that “surface temperature reconstructions for periods prior to the industrial era are only one of multiple lines of evidence supporting the conclusion that climatic warming is occurring in response to human activities, and they are not the primary evidence.”

The *Wall Street Journal* editorial page completely ignored this report. Instead it cited one commissioned by Barton from three statisticians with no background in climate science, who quibbled with aspects of Mann’s methodology. Nevertheless, on this flimsy and misleading basis, the editorial page declared that “there’s no reason to believe that Mr. Mann, or his ‘hockey stick’ graph of global temperature changes, is right,” called the research “dubious” and said that the climate science community “often more closely resembles a mutual-admiration society than a competitive and open-minded search for scientific knowledge.”

The *Wall Street Journal* is the most widely read business paper in the world. Its influence is extensive. Yet it gets a free pass on editorial irresponsibility. The Earth Institute at Columbia University has repeatedly invited the editorial team to meet with leading climate scientists. On many occasions, the news editors have eagerly accepted, but the editorial writers have remained safe in their splendid isolation.

Let me make the invitation once again. Many of the world’s leading climate scientists are prepared to meet with the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal* and to include in that meeting any climate skeptics that its editorial board wants to invite. The board owes it to the rest of us to conduct their own “open-minded search for scientific knowledge.”

The newspaper gets a free pass on editorial irresponsibility.

An expanded version of this essay is available online at www.sciam.com/ontheweb

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