

On the Wild Side

Why We Can't Face Up to Global Warming

By Gordon Douglas

The first question asked during the question period after Dr. Cullen's lecture, "The Weather of the Future", at the Cary Institute in Millbrook on August 20th was "What as individuals can we do to help the situation?" The "situation" is, of course, the severe impacts on the world's weather that Global Warming will bring. Two weeks ago I wrote about the world's grim weather outlook. I mentioned that the conservative scientific prediction for the planet's temperature at the end of this century is for a rise of nine degrees Fahrenheit. This is based on the assumption that we will continue polluting the atmosphere with greenhouse gases – unfortunately a very likely prospect.

We should also remember that global warming is currently triggering some irreversible changes that will greatly affect the weather. For example, we can't reverse the melting of Arctic Ocean ice or the Greenland ice covering. A white Arctic ice cap reflects the sun's rays but an open water Arctic Ocean, being darker, will absorb the heat. A warmer Arctic Ocean will change ocean currents causing major weather shifts. Warmer water also expands, raising sea levels.

Dr. Cullen was initially slow to answer. Perhaps she was concerned that her answer might be politically risky. She might have been leery of suggesting that we vote against politicians who block legislation addressing Global Climate Change or cutting back on fossil fuels. (Had I been answering, that would have been my response). After a few-seconds pause, Dr. Cullen instead urged us to cut back on our use of fossil energy and to switch to clean energy.

Our use of energy is inefficient and wasteful. After the oil crisis during the Carter administration in 1970's, we made significant strides in energy efficiency. We were so successful that producers dropped the price of oil, which made it easy for Americans to return to guzzling oil. Reagan symbolically removed the 32 hot water solar heating panels Carter had installed on the White House roof and energy independence and global warming were once again ignored.

We as individuals can significantly reduce our energy use. Heating and cooling buildings constitutes a large part of our individual energy consumption. For \$7,000 spent on insulation the average American home can reduce its fuel use by 30%. One reason for our failure in this regard is that the original owner of a home only stays there for seven years, so there is little incentive for him to plan ahead.

Another big fuel use is our vehicles. I drive a Prius II and get an honest 44 mpg. The bigger and better Prius III gets an amazing 50 mpg. There is no reason why American cars should not average at least 40mpg. Air travel is a large consumer of energy – and also polluting. There are times when a train or bus is just as convenient.

Why is it that so many Americans do not take Global Climate Change seriously and gamble with our children's future? Polls show that we trust our scientists, second only to firemen. Why don't we follow their recommendations? Perhaps the primary reason is that the oil industry is spending enormous sums on advertising disinformation. Like the cigarette industry before they have taken control of our subconscious and lead us to act self-destructively.

During the Cold War the great American chemist Linus Pauling warned that testing atomic weaponry in the atmosphere would result in radioactive cow's and mother's milk. The Administration immediately punished Pauling by revoking his passport. Not long after Pauling's warning, milk did become radioactive, confirming his prediction. Soon after the nuclear test ban treaty was signed and Pauling was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Will the United States need a similar shock to spur us to act on Global Warming?