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CLIMATE PROGRESS

Climate Progress: An insider's view of climate science, politics, and solutions

Exclusive interview with Dr. Mojib Latif, the man who confused the NY Times and New Scientist, the man who moved George Will and math-challenged Morano to extreme disinformation

October 1, 2009

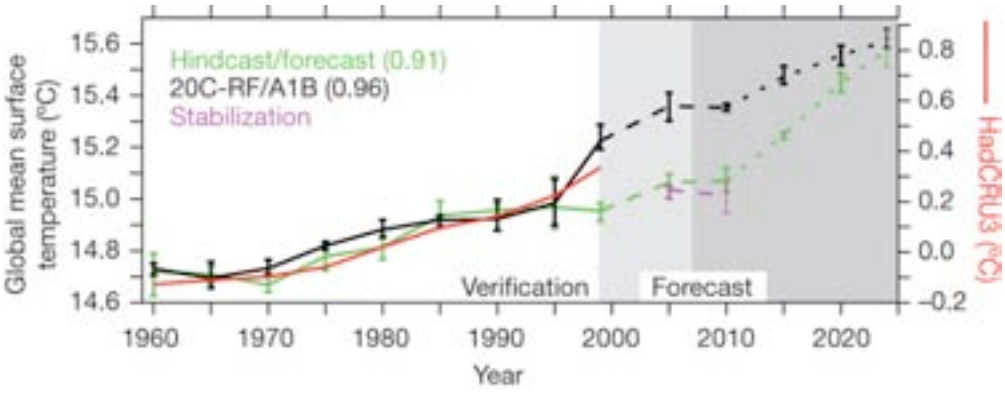
Memo to media and deniers: If your "global cooling" piece revolves around Dr. Latif, you probably have the entire story backwards. But, at least for deniers, that is the goal.

In an interview today, Dr. Latif told me "we don't trust our forecast beyond 2015″ and "it is just as likely you'll see accelerated warming" after then. Indeed, in his published research, rapid warming is all-but-inevitable over the next two decades. He told me, "you can't miss the long-term warming trend" in the temperature record, which is "driven by the evolution of greenhouse gases." Finally, he pointed out "Our work does not allow one to make any inferences about global warming."

Latif's work can be baffling, but I mostly deciphered it on this blog in 2008 (see "*Nature* article on 'cooling' confuses media, deniers: Next decade may see rapid warming"). Latif's *Nature* study is consistent with the following statements:

- The "coming decade" (2010 to 2020) is poised to be the warmest on record, globally.
- The coming decade is poised to see faster temperature rise than any decade since the authors' calculations began in 1960.

Here is his *Nature* "forecast" in green ("Each point represents a ten-year centred mean" — more discussion at the end):



Now, with the caveat that Latif claims no "skill" in any forecast after 2015 — a caveat the media and deniers never print — as you can see, **their model suggests we'll see pretty damn rapid**

warming in the coming decade, just as the Hadley Center did in a 2007 *Science* piece and just as the US Naval Research Lab and NASA recently predicted (see "Another major study predicts rapid warming over next few years — nearly 0.3°F by 2014").

How badly have the media [and deniers] botched this reporting unintentionally [and intentionally]? Let's see:

World will 'cool for the next decade'

Three mistakes in one *New Scientist* headline from last month — a record, I suspect. The headline would have been more accurate if it said, "World poised to see accelerated warming in the coming decade."

Then we have these multiply-misleading statements:

… global temperatures have been relatively stable for a decade and may even drop in the next few years….

Dr. Mojib Latif, a prize-winning climate and ocean scientist from the Leibniz Institute of Marine Sciences at the University of Kiel, wrote a paper last year positing that cyclical shifts in the oceans were aligning in a way that **could keep the next decade or so relatively cool**, even as the heat-trapping gases *linked* to global warming continue to increase.

Those quotes from Revkin's recent piece are *not* what Latif's paper posited. Revkin's entire thesis is wrong, as I showed here. Global temperatures have been rising measurably for decades. My extended interview with Latif makes clear just how inappropriate it is to use his work to make the case we are headed into a decade or more of being "relatively cool." At the very least, we are going to stay relatively hot. But you could just as easily — and more accurately — use his work to make the case that we are headed into a decade or more of rapid warming. He models only "internal fluctuations" around the overall anthropogenic warming trend, so if warming seems to stall for a few years, it must catch up to the long-term trend, sometimes quite rapidly.

[And I just noticed Revkin's use of the word "linked." C'mon, status quo media! That would be like saying South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford was "linked" to an Argentinian woman. They had a torrid affair, and heat-trapping gases **cause** global warming. That's why they're called "heat trapping gases"! But I digress.]

George Will quoted Revkin's error-riddled piece and then compounded the mistakes with a few outright falsehoods:

In the fifth paragraph, a "few years" became "the next decade or so," according to Mojib Latif, a German "prize-winning climate and ocean scientist" who campaigns constantly to promote policies combating global warming. Actually, Latif has said he anticipates "maybe even two" decades in which temperatures cool.

No, Latif does not "**anticipate**" maybe even two decades of cooling. He doesn't even predict it. Again, as Latif will happily tell anyone who asks, "**my only forecast is to 2015**."

The non-existent fact-checkers of the *Washington Post* could not even be bothered to click on the link they inserted, which doesn't even contain the phrase "maybe even two"! Will just made up the quote. And the link is to an editorial of *Investors Business Daily* [*IBD*] which is roughly equivalent to an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* as a source for climate facts.

And then we have the outright lies of the Swift boat smearer. In his never ending quest to destroy both a livable climate and the English language, the uber-disinformer and self-acknoweldged performance artist Marc Morano actually wrote:

Why does Eilperin fail to note that a top UN IPCC scientist, Mojib Latif of Kiel University in Germany told a UN conference earlier this month that he is now predicting global cooling for **several** **decades** and he admitted he was unsure how much the North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO) had impacted global temperatures in the past three decades.

So now Latif is "predicting global cooling for **several** decades" although the link to that assertion goes to Morano's own screamingly inaccurate headline:

UN Fears (More) Global Cooling Commeth! IPCC Scientist Warns UN: We are about to enter 'one or even 2 decades during which temps cool'

For Marc not-a-mathlete Morano, "one or even 2″ is the equivalent of "several." For Morano, even basic math and simple word choice is twisted beyond the bounds of reason. No doubt in the next version of the children's game of Telephone that Morano plays with himself, he'll claim that Latif is predicting a century of cooling.

But Morano's false headline — and Will's false statement — all derive from the link Morano provides to … yes, another *New Scientist* story — the origin of a lot of this confused Latif nonsense, which begins:

Forecasts of climate change are about to go seriously out of kilter.

One of the world's top climate modellers said Thursday we could be about to enter one or even two decades during which temperatures cool.

How is it possible that a scientist who says that he doesn't have faith in the skill or accuracy of his projections after 2015 can constantly be quoted as predicting the future over the next one or even two decades? Two reasons.

First, as "The Way Things Break" explained at length, "This was not an explicit prediction by Latif — it was a hypothetical scenario that is a real, if not necessarily likely, possibility."

Hypothetically, it could happen — hypothetically, monkeys could fly out of my butt — but Latif was most certainly **not predicting** it.

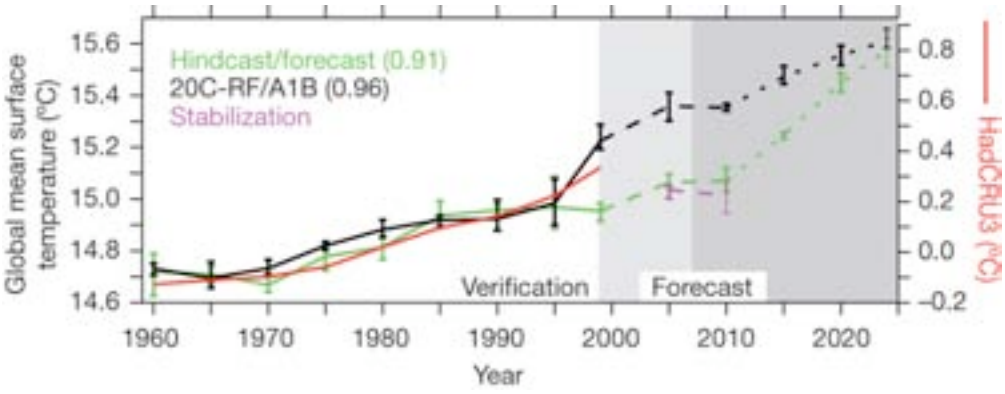
How do I know? I asked him, something that has gone out of fashion.

Again, Latif simply doesn't make predictions beyond 2015. As he told me, his model has "no skill" after that, which is to say it has no accuracy, and so "my only forecast is to 2015." Indeed, he told me "I can't really predict two decades in the future."

Their model has nothing whatsoever to do with anthropogenic global warming, and so it has no bearing whatsoever on the long-term temperature trend. They do model internal ocean-driven fluctuations around that trend, but if the temperature rise stalls for any length of time, the major impact is that subsequently, the temperature rise accelerates.

Second, there is another source of confusion. Let's look in more detail at the paper's key figure, the one that looks at past and (forecast) future global temperatures, "Hindcast/forecast decadal

variations in global mean temperature, as compared with observations and standard climate model projections" (click to enlarge)



Let me once again try to explain this complicated figure.

The first thing to know about the figure — indeed, one major source of confusion — is that "**each point represents a ten-year centred mean**." That is, each point represents the average temperature of the decade starting 5 years before that point and ending 5 years after that point.

Second, the red line is the actual global temperature data from the UK's Hadley Center for Climate Prediction and Research. Why does the red line stop in 1998 and not 2007? Again, it is a running 10-year mean, and the authors use data from a Hadley paper that ends around 2003 (I believe), so they can't do a ten-year centered mean after 1998.

Third, the black line is one of the IPCC scenarios, A1B. It is a relatively high-CO2-growth model — but actual carbon emissions since 2000 have wildly outpaced it (see here).

Fourth, the solid green line is the "hindcast" of the authors — how well their model compares to actual data (and the A1B scenario). It is then extended (in dashes) through 2010 and finally to 2025, where it meets up with A1B, since their model only imposes decadal variability on the inexorable climb of human-caused global warming.

[Fifth, the short purple line is with radiative forcing (i.e greenhouse gas concentrations) frozen at 2000 levels, which, of course, didn't happen.]

So you can clearly see that the green line rises and then plateaus, repeatedly, until it really starts to take off in the decade of the 2010s. Perhaps the source of much of the media's confusion is that the authors describe their results in the final line of the abstract this way:

Our results suggest that global surface temperature may not increase *over the next decade*, as natural climate variations in the North Atlantic and tropical Pacific temporarily offset the projected anthropogenic warming.

But what they mean by that statement is **not** what a simple reading of that sentence would suggest: They do **not** mean that "the global surface temperature may not increase over the next ten years starting now." What they mean is what the lead author, Dr. Noel Keenlyside, wrote me [in 2008] when I asked for a clarification:

Thus, based on our results **we don't expect an increase in the mean temperature of the next decade (2005-2015)**.

They are predicting no increase in average temperature of the "next decade" (2005 to 2015) over the previous decade, which, for them, is 2000 to 2010! And that's in fact precisely what the figure shows — that the 10-year mean global temperature centered around 2010 is the roughly the same as the mean global temperature centered around 2005.

The authors have not predicted the next 10 years won't see any warming. They have, however, offered an explanation for why temperatures have not risen very much in recent years, and, perhaps, why ocean temperatures have also not risen very much in the past few years (see here). Dr. Keenlyside continues:

However, **as you correctly point out, our results show a pick up in global mean temperature for the following decade (2010-2020). Assuming a smooth transition in temperature, *our results would indicate the warming picks up earlier than 2015***.

Again, at that point, Dr. Keenlyside reiterates the disclaimer that this analysis can't be used for year-by year predictions. Indeed, he notes that his main conclusion is not really quantitative, but qualitative:

Given the uncertainties that exist in such kinds of preliminary studies, I believe it is more useful to point out that climate on decadal timescales may be quite different from that expected only considering external radiative forcing (as in the IPCC). This is actually an obvious, but I believe mostly overlooked fact. Our results highlight this.

I would add two points. First, as you can clearly see in the figure — the actual observed runnning average temperatures from the Hadley Center since 1995 have been **between** the IPCC scenario projection and Dr. Keenlyside's forecast, which does suggest that his model may be underestimating warming. Indeed, **the lack of agreement between the model's "hindcast" and actual temperatures since 1995 should remind us again to view this only as a very preliminary analysis with predictive ability that is much more qualitative than quantitative**.

Second, this general prediction — internal variability leading to slower than expected warming in recent years through 2010, followed by accelerated warming — is almost exactly the same prediction that the Hadley Center made last summer in *Science (*see here). They concluded:

… at least half of the years after 2009 predicted to exceed the warmest year currently on record.

… [2014 will] "be 0.30° ± 0.2°C warmer than the observed value for 2004."

Similarly, the US Naval Research Lab and NASA just predicted in a new *Geophysical Research Letters* study (see "here"):

From 2009 to 2014, projected rises in anthropogenic influences and solar irradiance will increase global surface temperature 0.15 ±0.03 °C, at a rate 50% greater than predicted by IPCC.

So I take all three of these admittedly preliminary short-term forecasts to suggest that warming is going to be a roller coaster ride, with much short-term variation, but we are probably going to get quite hot quite fast early in the 2010s.

One final caveat: After reading my first draft of the 2008 post (which I subsequently revised), Dr. Keenlyside wrote me, "All our figures are decadal means, and it is hard to say (due to high frequency internal variability) at which point [after 2010] a rapid increase will occur." That is, his study does not necessarily predict the rapid warming will actually start, in say, 2011, though his

results are not inconsistent with that possibility. He reiterates that his paper is not designed to make such detailed year-by-year predictions. Indeed, the paper was designed to show that any such predictions are complicated by decadal-scale climate factors.

So I think it is quite safe to say that:

1. The work of Dr. Latif and Dr. Keenlyside in *Nature* "does not allow one to make any inferences about anthropogenic global warming," as Dr. Latif put it to me.
2. Their work has no forecasting skill after 2015. Indeed, Latif told me "we don't trust our forecast beyond 2015."
3. Dr. Latif is not making any predictions about what will happen after 2015 — other than that the long-term temperature warming trend driven by anthropogenic GHGs will continue and that the near-term temperature trend must catch up with the long-term trend, likely during a period of rapid warming.
4. Reporters are going to keep getting this wrong.
5. Deniers are going to keep getting pretty much everything wrong.

Latif told me that at the request of the *NYT*, he submitted an op-ed to clarify his work. That will clear things up once and for all. Or not.

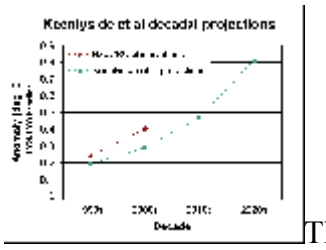
As a great sage once said, "Anyone who isn't confused here doesn't really know what's going on."

UPDATE: More from Deep Climate: anatomy-of-a-lie-how-morano-and-gunter-spun-latif-out-of-control and here.

http://climateprogress.org/2009/10/01/interview-with-dr-mojib-latif-global-cooling-revkin-morano-george-will/

Anatomy of a lie: How Marc Morano and Lorne Gunter spun Mojib Latif's remarks out of control

October 2, 2009 · 3 Comments



The blogosphere has been atwitter over the latest supposed defection of a climate scientist to the dark side. Once again, the contrarians have been egged on by a well-timed fabrication from Marc Morano of Climate Depot, the anti-science propaganda arm of CFACT (Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow). And once again, Canadian columnist Lorne Gunter has led the charge of the lightweight brigade, with yet another error-ridden and cretinous diatribe against climate science.

[**Update, Oct. 6:** Read the post and then see the video. Lorne Gunter stars in Climate Denial Crock of the Week: Birth of a Crock. Peter Sinclair delivers another boffo smash.]

Even well-meaning and thoughtful commentators and reporters have misinterpreted the recent comments and work of Mojib Latif, the Kiel University climate scientist whose remarks at a session

on prediction at the World Climate Conference in Geneva set off the latest furor. Somehow those writers have managed to overlook the fact that Latif, despite projecting less near-term warming than most climate modellers, is still looking for warming close to 0.2 deg. C in the coming decade.

But those gaffes are nothing compared to the horrendous distortions of the initial confused accounts now circulating throughout the contrarian echo chamber, where literally hundreds of websites and blogs have echoed Morano's and Gunter's gross misrepresentations.

It's high time to correct the record, which I will endeavour to do with the kind assistance of Mojib Latif himself, who has been most generous in answering my queries (our complete exchange can be found here).

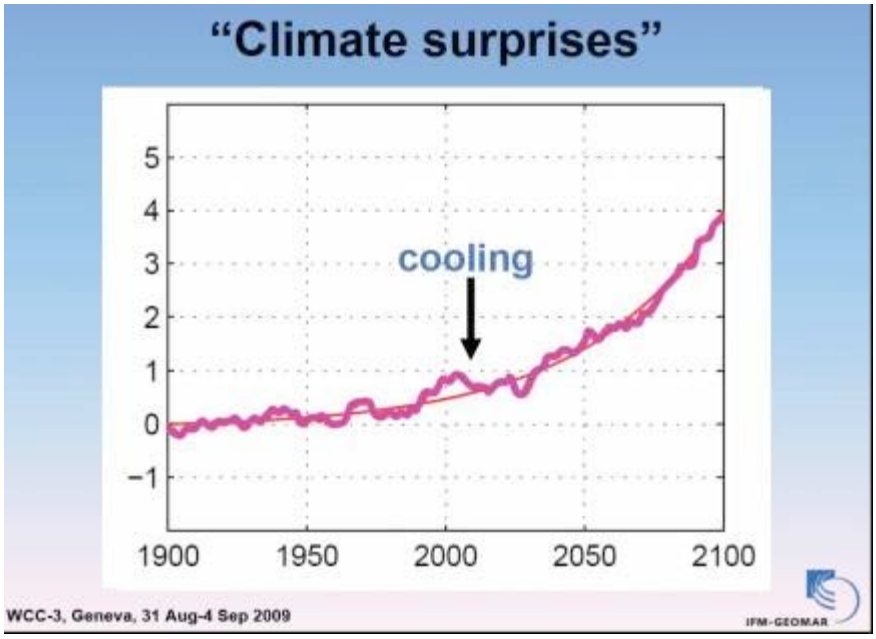
Read the following sequence of quotes and weep:

- **Sept. 1:** *It **may well happen that you enter** a decade, or maybe even two, when the temperature cools, relative to the present level.* - Mojib Latif at World Climate Conference in Geneva
- **Sept. 4:** *One of the world's top climate modellers said Thursday **we could be about to enter** one or even two decades during which temperatures cool.* – Fred Pearce, New Scientist.
- **Sept. 5:** *UN Fears (More) Global Cooling Commeth! IPCC Scientist Warns UN: **We are about to enter** 'one or even 2 decades during which temps cool'* – Marc Morano, Climate Depot (CFACT)
- **Sept. 19:** *Latif conceded … that **we are likely entering** "one or even two decades during which temperatures cool."* - Lorne Gunter, Calgary Herald.
- **Sept. 25:** *Mojib Latif of Kiel University in Germany told a UN conference earlier this month that he is **now predicting global cooling for several decades.*** - Marc Morano, Climate Depot (CFACT).
- **Sept. 28: 1240 hits**, and counting, for the Google search *"Latif" " **likely entering** one or even two decades during which temperatures cool"*

The first step in this sorry story, of course, was the misunderstanding of Latif's remarks by Fred Pearce, in the New Scientist article entitled "World's climate could cool first, warm later". As explained in the careful dissection of Latif's original remarks at the ThingsBreak blog, Latif's hypothetical cautionary situation was misinterpreted as an actual prediction, concerning the coming decade.

This excerpt from Latif's presentation makes the point (I have transcribed key portions, with three key slides, in a separate post):

However we all know there is variability, and this variability may look like this. This has been actually derived from the 20th century by just removing some exponential fit… And then the real evolution of, say, globally averaged temperature would look like this.



And then you see right away [that] it may well happen that you enter a decade or maybe even two, when the temperature cools relative to the present level.

So, Latif extracted the exponential fit from the 20th century, extended the curve into the 21st, and then simulated some variability around that curve, in order to illustrate the point that, theoretically at least, one could have one or even two decades of cooling. (Of course, the displayed curve can in no way be mistaken for the actual temperature curve of the 20th century, nor any published projection or prediction in the 21st century – unless there's one out there that includes a super-volcano around 2030!)

In fact, the actual projection discussed much later in the same session by Latif does not even call for cooling in the coming decade as a whole, but rather estimates 0.18C warming relative to the last decade. (I have more on this below, but the impatient among you can have an advance peek at this figure summarizing Keenlyside et al 2008 projections on which co-author Latif based his discussion).

To be sure, Pearce is not the only one to have misunderstood this work. Andy Revkin has also had problems coming to grips with it, as pointed out by Joe Romm last year and last week, and discussed here at Deep Climate recently. New Scientist itself had previously published a confused report on Keenlyside et al. (And what are we make of Pearce's statement that "more and more agree that the short-term prognosis for climate change is much less certain", when the proffered evidence is … the very same study Latif presented!)

Marc Morano was only too happy to add to the the confusion, as only Morano can, and actually claimed with a straight face that Latif had said world "is about to enter 'one maybe 2 decades where temps cool'" [sic]. Not "could" or "might" or even "likely" – just a bald, flatout assertion. More recently, that lie (what other word is there?) was expanded to have Latif "predicting global cooling for several decades". Apparently, the coming period of cooling is growing faster than Pinnochio's nose.

Things really careened out of control once Lorne Gunter got hold of the story. Gunter, who can't seem to write a single paragraph on climate science without getting something wrong (for instance here, here and here), goes through an elaborate teasing setup. Latif's change of heart, Gunter explains, is like the Pope deciding that priests should be allowed to marry after all, or, even less

likely, that “rock-em-sock-em” hockey analyst Don Cherry has all of a sudden taken a liking to European style hockey (hey, this is Canada).

Finally, we get to Gunter’s version of what Latif said (apparently based on the New Scientist article, with a possible assist from Morano):

Latif conceded the Earth has not warmed for nearly a decade and that we are likely entering “one or even two decades during which temperatures cool.”

There is so much wrong with this that one hardly knows where to start. First note the differences from Pearce’s version:

One of the world’s top climate modellers said Thursday we could be about to enter one or even two decades during which temperatures cool.

So where Pearce had “could be about to enter”, Gunter has “likely entering”, transforming a possibility, hypothetical at that, into likelihood. And somehow Pearce’s paraphrase has become the exact words out of Latif’s mouth in Gunter’s version.

Not only that, but the supposed “concession” by Latif concerning the past decade is not found at all in the New Scientist article or in Latif’s presentation; that appears to be a fabrication from whole cloth. (In fact, as we shall see later Pearce actually refers to the “strong warming” of the past three decades, in direct contradiction to Gunter’s assertion.)

You think that’s bad? Look at this paragraph from Gunter, containing his only other supposed Latif direct quote:

But as Latif pointed out, the Atlantic, and particularly the North Atlantic, has been cooling instead. And it looks set to continue a cooling phase for 10 to 20 more years.

“How much?” he wondered before the assembled delegates. “The jury is still out.”

…. Latif says he expects warming to resume in 2020 or 2030.

Now here’s the same direct quote from the New Scientist – but somehow in a totally different context:

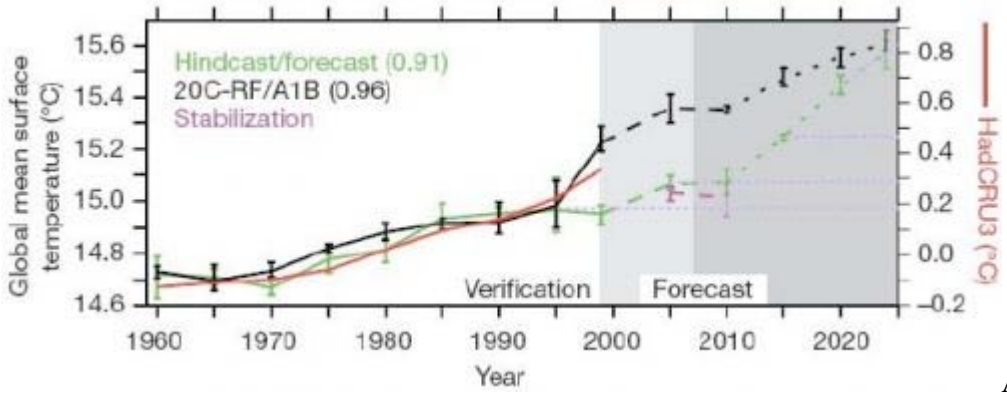
Breaking with climate-change orthodoxy, he said NAO [North Atlantic Oscillation] cycles were probably responsible for some of the strong global warming seen in the past three decades. “But how much? The jury is still out,” he told the conference. The NAO is now moving into a colder phase.

So Gunter claims that Latif projects Atlantic cooling for another 10 to 20 years, another apparent fabrication, and that warming might only resume in 2030. But in fact, Latif only projects moderated warming up to 2015. And the Latif quote in New Scientist was actually about possible attribution of past warming, not future cooling!

Latif did say in his presentation that the North Atlantic Oscillation, and therefore North Atlantic sea temperatures, could be predicted with “significant skill out to ten, maybe even twenty years.” But he presented no actual prediction of Atlantic cooling for up to twenty years. (Once again, New Scientist’s Pearce is closer, but not quite there: according to Latif the “jury is out” on the “relative contribution” of “internal variability” in general).

As I mentioned above, I decided to analyze the Keenlyside et al 2008 projections presented by Latif (Nature abstract here), since there has been so much misinformation on the subject. At the same time, I entered into correspondence with Latif, who kindly has given me permission to publish our exchange (see the companion post).

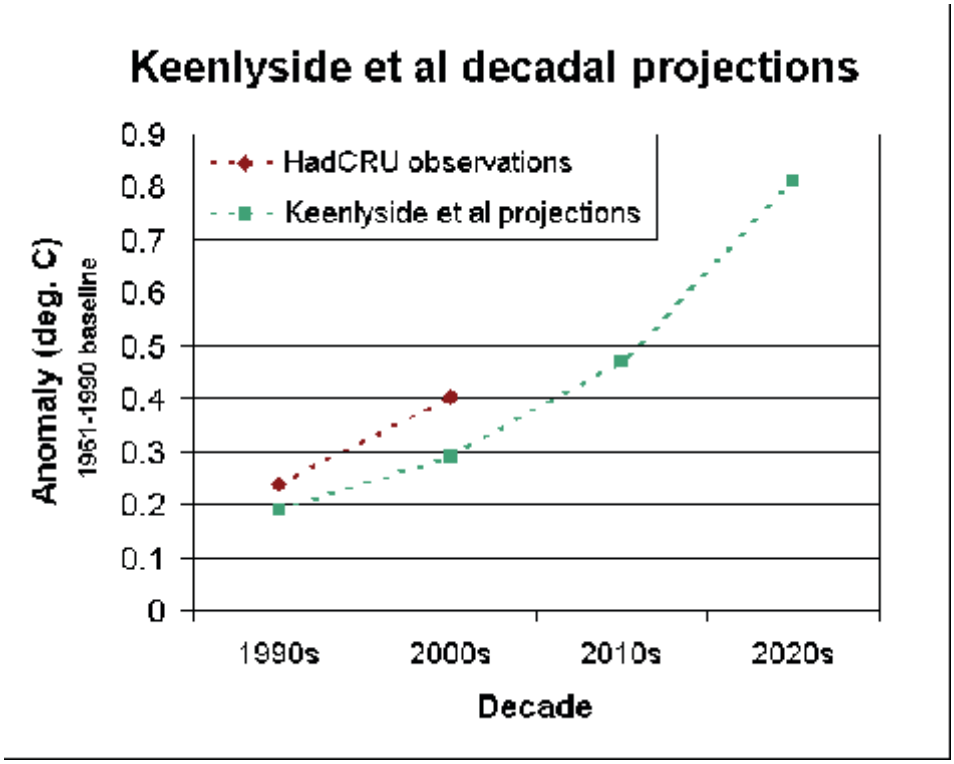
Here is the key figure from that study, marked up to highlight the projections for each of the decades 2000-10, 2010-20, and 2020-30. The chart features a forecast curve based on interpolation between particular decadal projections. Each decade is centred on the corresponding year, so that the projection at 2015, corresponds to the decade 2010-2020, for example. Somewhat confusingly, that also means that the decadal projections are overlapping (e.g. 2010 is for 2005-2015).



As can be seen by the chart above, a flat period is projected to about 2015, but in subsequent decades strong global warming resumes (the figure is interpolated between decades centred at 2010 and 2020, and thus no precise time of resumption is given).

Of course, this chart clearly shows that the moderate warming projected for the past decade has been surpassed by a long shot, and a brief cooling period in 1995-2004 did not happen either. These observations were made at RealClimate.org at the time the study was released; the same commentary noted that the projection also seem to suffer from oscillations due to "coupling shock".

But for our purposes the coming two decades are just as important; **in contrast with Gunter's characterization of "likely" cooling over the next decade "or even two", Keenlyside and Latif project 0.18C in the coming decade, and 0.35C in the one after that!** Gunter could not have gotten it more wrong. For greater clarity, I have plotted the projections, but this time without overlapping decades, including a hindcast for the 1990s. And I have also put in HadCRU decadal observations for the past two decades, leaving off a half-year for the current decade.



In response to my initial query, Latif summarized his remarks as follows:

What I said is that the cooling in the Atlantic and Pacific may offset global warming for a decade so that there may be not much of an additional warming. … I also pointed out that the British group issued a competing forecast for the next decade. They predict that global warming will continue at the rate of the last decades. Thus there is quite some uncertainty about the short-term evolution. Yet we all agree that in the long run, say by 2050 and thereafter, the earth will considerably warm, if we do not considerably reduce global greenhouse gas emissions.

Note that this is clearly not an expectation of cooling in the near term, but rather considerably reduced warming. I went on to present the decadal projections and the differences calculated, as seen above. Latif provided the following comments:

This is all correct. However, our forecast more than one decade ahead does not have much skill, as we know from hindcasts (retropsective forecasts). I think what is important to convey is that there are short-term fluctuations which are superimposed on the long-term warming trend.

Exactly. And clearly a precise time for resumption of warming can not be fixed in the Keenlyside/Latif model. Nevertheless, the forecasts beyond one decade (i.e. beyond 2015) call for strong warming in the long term and any uncertainties may cut either way:

We showed the graph more than a decade ahead to see how long the effect of the initial conditions lasts. It is a forecast, but as I pointed out, we do not have much skill at longer lead times. It may well be that the warming will be even stronger.

And, of course, it must be emphasized that this view of reduced warming for the next few years is far from accepted among the majority of climate modelers, as Latif himself has always acknowledged. So far, observations seem to show considerably more warming than projected by Keenlyside and Latif.

So where does that leave us? A week ago I left a comment at the Calgary Herald requesting corrections of the most egregious errors, although now that I've had a chance to examine and

document all of Gunter's falsehoods, it seems that a complete retraction would be appropriate in this case.

However, Gunter usually writes for the Herald's sister newspapers the Edmonton Journal and the National Post (all part of the CanWest Global media chain). In the past the Journal has corrected Gunter's factual mistakes, albeit very slowly, while the Post has refused to do so. Will the Herald, like the Journal, do the right thing? Or will it stonewall, like the Post?

As Latif himself might say, the jury is still out.

The sad and disturbing facts are these: PR disinformation specialists like Marc Morano and complaisant columnists like Lorne Gunter are lying to us about climate science. Those lies are getting wide circulation through media outlets such as FoxNews and the National Post, and at their base are part of a clearly illegitimate campaign to influence politicians and the public, paid for by well-hidden fossil-fuel interests.

Meanwhile, outside the contrarian echo chamber, there is an eerie and disturbing silence concerning those facts in the mainstream press. Why is that? And isn't it time that changed?

http://deepclimate.org/2009/10/02/anatomy-of-a-lie-how-morano-and-gunter-spun-latif-out-of-contro/

Deep Climate

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Vaclav Smil on climate change: "No global warming in past ten years"

October 19, 2009 · 19 Comments

Here's an astonishing segment from a recent interview with futurist Vaclav Smil, conducted by New York Times environmental reporter Andrew Revkin. Smil claims that there has been "no global warming in the past ten years" and appears to suggest that we can safely ignore the problem of climate change because it won't hit with "full force" any time soon, and its full impact is as yet unknown.

The interview came last Saturday at the Quantum to Cosmos Festival (Q2C)l in Waterloo, Ontario, a 10-day presentation of the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics. Smil is a professor at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, and the author of 30 books, the most recent being "The Global Catastrophes and Trends: The Next Fifty Years."

At Dotearth, Andrew Revkin presented highlights from the wide-ranging interview, including this statement about climate change:

This is not going to be with us in full force — nobody claims it, even the orthodox people, in 2015…. But in between there are a great many things coming in between…. The pandemic is number one. Because we are overdue for a pandemic.

Below, I've excerpted most of the exchange that led to the above statement. The segment starts 22 minutes into the interview (30 minutes in the Q2C "padded" version).

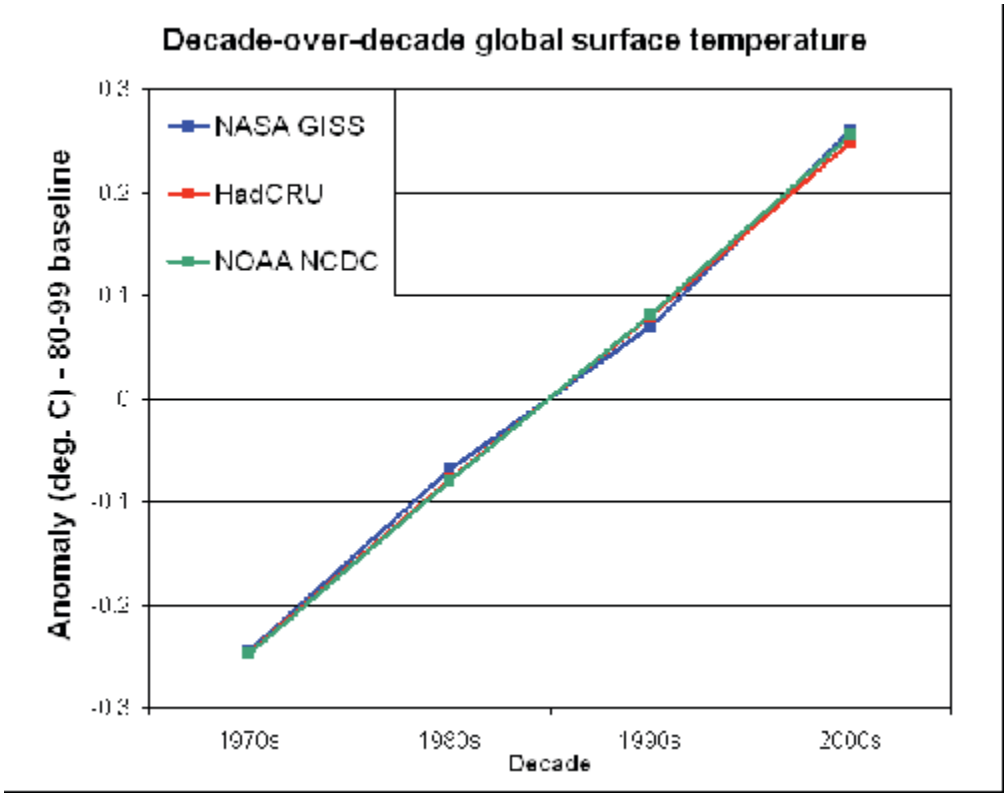
Revkin paraphrased his question as "Is climate change the biggest pinch point, or are other issues more pressing?" (The wording is slightly different, but that is clearly the correct sense of the question).

Revkin: Your most recent book is on these catastrophes or emergencies that are coming or could be coming… Climate has been one that has been talked about so much lately… If you accept the basics that these gases trap heat and we double or triple the amount in the atmosphere, we're in for a lot of climate change. Is that the biggest pinch point or are there other things that would come up before that?

Smil: … This global warming is very complex and we don't know. You know very well what happened in the last ten years. Basically no global warming in past ten years And people say: Oh, we anticipated it. I say: Who did? … Did Jim Hansen in 1988, in his famous speech to congress, did he say that global warming is here, but it will basically stop for ten years?

It does not mean at all it will not jump back again with as much force in five or ten years. But I am just giving you the example of the last 10 years. It is very complex.

Of course, the so-called "stop" or "pause" in global warming has been debunked time and time again, both here and elsewhere. For example, here is a chart of decadal increases for the three main surface global temperature series.



It can be clearly seen that global warming continued in 2000-9, relative to the previous decade. Decadal warming has ranged from from 0.17C (HadCRU) to 0.19C (NASA GISS).

At this point, Revkin tried to remind Smil that the so-called "pause" is simply a "wiggle" in the "curve", although he stops short of saying outright that Smil is dead wrong. But Smil is having none of it. He then goes on to insist that a coming global pandemic, costing up to 60 million lives, is a much more pressing problem .

Revkin: We're so focused on the here and now, which is of course about that kind of wiggle in the curve. This is something I've characterized as a "slow drip" problem … and we're always distracted by what's happening now.

Smil: If you have this orthodox view, what I call the IPCC view… Now people are publishing these papers saying that it will be much worse than we anticipated. But we have been there before and maybe in five years they'll be saying it it will be a little better than we anticipated.

The point is that this is unfolding slowly. This is not going to be with us in full force — nobody claims it, even the orthodox people, in 2015…. But in between there are a great many things coming …. The pandemic is number one. Because we are overdue for a pandemic.

So why does Smil think that climate change is so overrated as a problem? Some clues come in this summary of his thinking from a review in American Scientist.

Smil is blunt in his criticisms of the global-warming pessimists, saying that we simply don't know enough about the complex interactions and feedbacks that may take place to be able to reliably quantify the likely consequences of the warming that is occurring. His estimate is that there will be a temperature increase of 2.5 degrees to 3 degrees Celsius over the next hundred years, a figure that is about at the midpoint of recent projections by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Apparently the industrialized nations in the Northern Hemisphere have the wealth and technical capabilities to handle this increase, but poor countries in the global South, which are already carrying an unmanageable load, will find it quite burdensome. (Smil's usual concern with the interaction of variables is not in evidence in this case. Does he think that the multitudes who cannot cope will quietly disappear?) Although he stresses the difficulty of estimating future sea levels, he says that "a cautious conclusion" would be that they will rise about 15 centimeters by 2050—"clearly a noncatastrophic change." He concludes surprisingly that the market impacts of a moderate warming will be "a trivial sum in all affluent countries" (which prorates to about $180 a year per capita), citing in support work by Yale economist William D. Nordhaus. (Other respected economists disagree.)

So Smil appears to think that anthropogenic global warming of the scale aniticipted by the IPCC is real, but entirely manageable, at least for wealthy nations. I guess we'll have to read the book to understand why he thinks the inevitable food shortages caused by massive deglaciation in the Himalayan watershed, for example, will not be disastrous for the nations of that region, not to mention having widespread repercussions. And at a time when most scientists think a 1 meter rise in sea level by 2100 is inevitable, his dismissal of the inexorable rise in sea level as a problem to be mitigated sooner rather than later is puzzling indeed.

Another interesting Smil interview from 2006 can be found at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, the right-wing (and climate contrarian) think tank based in Smil's home town of Winnipeg. (The FCPP recently presented the pompous contrarian Lord Monckton in a series of lectures, as I noted previously here and here).

Here is Smil on solar energy and the oil sands in northern Alberta:

FC: What alternative energy sources do you think show the best prospects?

VS: *In the long-term prospect, no doubt about it, photovoltaic conversion of solar energy, because it is an unlimited source and you convert solar radiation directly into electricity. There are more places around the world which are sunny, even in high latitudes, than ones that are windy or have geothermal energy. When you look at geothermal, tidal or wind, the total amount of resources and their locations around the planet, the energy available is not as abundant as direct solar radiation. We should be pouring more of our money into research into high-efficiency photovoltaic electricity conversion.*

FC: You also cite the tar sands as a great energy resource in Canada, but worry that we are burning plenty of valuable natural gas to extract the oil. Can you comment?

VS: *If it were the only way the world could get energy, then it would be fine, but we have other, cheaper ways. That money would be better invested in geophysical exploration for conventional oil elsewhere around the world, because there is still plenty to be discovered, offshore, in Africa and in Asia. Only when we run out of conventional oil should we take this serious step into non-conventional oil.*

What a difference three years makes. Now Smil is touting cheap shale natural gas as a source of energy for decades to come, and an example of how energy analysts (including himself presumably) always get it wrong. There's no word yet if that means the oil sands are okay after all.

http://deepclimate.org/2009/10/19/vaclav-smil-no-global-warming-in-past-ten-year/