

How Robust is the Science of Climate Change?

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In the run up to the Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change, hackers broke into computers at the University of East Anglia's Climate Research Centre and got access to many private emails exchanged between climate scientists who have worked with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This ignited a global controversy about the reliability of the IPCC's data and methodology. It forced the chief scientist at the centre of the row, Professor Phil Jones, to step down temporarily as head of the university's climate research centre, while an independent enquiry into the matter was being conducted,

Many of these emails were seized upon by climate sceptics who claimed that scientists associated with the IPCC had excluded data from scientists who questioned the IPCC's consensus that human-induced activities, especially burning fossil fuel, are significant elements in the current planetary global warming. News outlets such as Fox News in the U.S. and conservative politicians such as Senator James M Inhofe, the Republican Senator from Oklahoma, and Tony Abbott, the new leader of the opposition in Australia and Nigel Lawson in Britain claimed that the content of the emails vindicated their scepticism.

So, everyone expected that the chair of the IPCC, Prof. R.K Pachauri would deal with the issue at the first possible opportunity at the Copenhagen conference. At a meeting on the "IPCC Findings and Activities and their Relevance for the UNFCCC Process" on December 9th 2009, Pachauri addressed the controversy head on. He said that "it is unfortunate that an illegal act of accessing private emails communication between scientists who have been involved as authors in the IPCC assessment in the past has led to several questions and concerns. It is important for me to clarify that the IPCC as a body follows impartial, open and objective assessment of every aspect of climate change carried out with complete transparency." He pointed out that "the IPCC relies mainly on peer reviewed literature in carrying out its assessment and follows a process that renders it unlikely that any peer reviewed piece of literature, however contrary to the views of any individual author, would be left out. Furthermore, "the entire report writing process of the IPCC is subjected to extensive and repeated review by experts as well as governments.

Consequently, there is, at every stage, full opportunity for experts in the field to draw attention to any piece of literature and its basic findings that would ensure inclusion of a range of views.” He went on to emphasise that “there is no possibility of exclusion of any contrarian views, if they have been published in established journals or other publications that are peer reviewed.”

He was at pains to point out that the IPCC reports, while using the best available science, are not completely dependent on scientists. “I would like to highlight the fact that the summary for policymakers of all the reports of the IPCC are accepted and approved by all the governments of the world.”

As a consequence of this painstaking and thorough process “no individual or small group of scientists is in a position to exclude a peer-reviewed paper from the IPCC assessment. Likewise, individuals and small groups have no ability to emphasize a result that is not consistent with a range of studies, investigations, and approaches.” There are many layers in the IPCC process, beginning with the large number of authors, from a wide range of scientific disciplines, who are involved in the writing process. On top of that, there is an extensive monitoring and review process and, finally governments sign off on the findings. As a result Dr. Pachauri rejected any biased findings. On the contrary he claimed that “the IPCC assessment Reports are comprehensive, unbiased and based on the best scientific data available at the time. Its findings can be relied upon and can form the basis for relevant policy decisions by policy makers. The remit of the IPCC does not allow it to become policy prescriptive.”

At the end of his statement he returned to the illegal hacking of private emails at the University of East Anglia. According to Pachauri the private emails have been taken out of their proper context. If I say, in a private email, that I could kill a particular scientist for writing a non-peer-reviewed, contrarian article about climate change, it doesn’t mean I plan to buy a gun and go out and shoot him. It means that I am as mad as hell, because I believe promoting non-peer reviewed, contrarian positions muddies the waters and slows down the possibility for the decisive actions which will be needed to stabilize atmospheric gases immediately. It is essential that these decisions are taken here at Copenhagen in order to avoid the worst consequences of climate change, which will affect the poor disproportionately. According to Dr. Pachauri the “incident only highlights the importance of IPCC procedures and practices and the thoroughness by which the Panel carries out its assessments.” Whether these answers will satisfy the sceptics or those sitting on the fence remains to be seen.