

Article published Feb 11, 2010

Real science, real world

John McClaughry would like me to take sides within his fantasy world, where scientists are conspiring to create anthropogenic climate change! This latest conspiracy theory is just a new version of "If you don't like the news, find a way to shoot the messenger(s)". Fortunately I can choose to duck this bullet and address the questions I can answer. I have been funded by the National Science Foundation and NASA as an independent researcher of weather and climate here in Vermont for the past 30 years [through four Democratic and five Republican administrations].

Who can you trust in a world where the Web can selectively amplify peoples' fears and ignorance so quickly, with so little effort and cost? The Web can also be used to find out who is a credible witness on climate science. Type my name "A.K. Betts" into googlescholar.com, and you can track my research on weather and climate across the continents and see who has used it over the decades. Then ask a few of those colleagues whether I am a credible scientist. Type in "John McClaughry" and you will see that since the 1970s he has been opposing government interference in society – but you won't find any research related to weather or climate. His letter reflects not climate science but his well-documented political views.

Meanwhile, scientists are drilling into the Western Antarctic Ice Sheet to get an annual record of the past 100,000 years of the Earth's history [Science, Jan. 28, 2010]. They have reached a depth of nearly 8,500 feet (2,561 meters). It is grueling work in the cold and relentless wind; and they were only able to drill for 35 days this year — but we need that data. And in the Arctic, the sea ice has been thinning and shrinking for decades. Yes, it is true we lack enough data at high latitudes, and so for now it must be filled in from what we know.

I suggest that the Ethan Allen Institute put their beliefs to the test and establish a research center on the Arctic sea ice. They can collect high quality data and analyze it. If they are right and the ice doesn't melt, then the ice fishing will be good (in summer). But I also recommend that they have a backup plan, because like the rest of us on Planet Earth, they may need one. They should hire Inuit fishermen with ocean-going kayaks to rescue them if the melting of the polar ice continues. Otherwise they will have to swim for their lives with the polar bears.

Alan Betts writes for the Sunday Rutland Herald's Weekly Planet column.