

Too hot to handle?

Globally, atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) is increasing to dangerous levels. Too much of anything – even oxygen – can be disastrous for life as we know it. At the rate of increase, CO₂ can only present greater danger sooner, if governments continue to delay action to impose carbon taxes.

*

What is it about the global warming debate (aka ‘climate change debate’) that gets many people so hot under the collar?

For fifty years or more, ever since [Dr Charles David Keeling](#) alerted the world to the problem of increasing levels of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere, there has probably been way too much said, and too little done, about tackling the issue seriously.

Like others, I’ve followed the debate about climate change for many years, beginning in 2003. I’ve read reports that clearly demonstrate that our planet undergoes cyclical changes in weather patterns: at some times, the earth has been hotter; at others, there have been cooling periods. Even today’s school kids know something about Ice Ages and severe droughts. Australia, for example, only recently emerged from a ten year drought; though today, as I write, half of Queensland (a size comparable to the areas of France and Germany combined) is under water, with some rivers exceeding all historical flood levels. It’s the wettest December here since 1859 – in the driest continent on the planet.

Are increases in atmospheric CO₂ emissions a factor in such climate changes?

Well, CO₂ and many other gases have been part of the earth’s atmosphere for millions of years. Hence the mere presence of CO₂ has an effect upon weather for the very simple reason that the gas traps heat, sometimes with disastrous results: [the climate of the planet Venus](#) is an obvious example. Equally, should the earth’s atmospheric CO₂ levels increase, a rise in temperature will follow, however slight it might be. Most know that temperature increases (and decreases) affect weather patterns. So, it’s entirely possible that the gradual increases in atmospheric CO₂ have played a part – however small – in the recent severe storms and flooding in Australia, Pakistan and elsewhere.

Only the ignorant or foolish would deny that possibility, leaving others to dicker about the degree of *probability*. Those in that latter camp miss the crucial point, however: the level of atmospheric CO₂ continues to rise, inexorably, regardless of so-called probabilities.

Now, levels of atmospheric CO₂ have fluctuated over millions of years and for various reasons e.g. the incidence of volcanic eruptions and absorption of CO₂ by the sea, to name two. It still varies for the same reasons. Since the beginning of the

industrial revolution, however, there is no doubt that humanity, collectively, has helped to push the level of atmospheric CO₂ to higher levels. **One source** puts the figure at a 35% increase. Of course, nobody has an exact figure to which all agree. That is not only obvious but is also a major impediment to acting decisively to reduce CO₂ levels in the atmosphere.

Why is that so? Because, while debate about the degree to which humans are partially or solely responsible continues, vested business and government interests can obfuscate, deny, delay, and deride all efforts to spend money for an issue thought to be purely cyclical or of questionable science or a government conspiracy to raise taxes; or all three concurrently.

That's a curiously illogical stance when considered objectively. I, along with others, accept the cyclical aspect of atmospheric CO₂; it's been that way for hundreds of millions of years – long before humanity (and other animals) evolved. We are simply adding stupendous amounts of CO₂ to an existing condition. Granted also, there will be scientific aspects that require review and further study: that's always part of the scientific process, anyway. And, as for government taxes? Well, even if the conspiracy angle is true (which I doubt), it won't necessarily make any difference: a tax on something *here* can always be offset by a reduction of tax *there*. It's up to citizens to elect responsible governments – not Big Business lackeys – that have sensible carbon dioxide reduction policies.

Over twenty years ago, the government and business worlds combined to eliminate chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in the atmosphere **that were destroying the ozone layer** in the earth's atmosphere. The Montreal protocol, fortunately, effectively put a stop to the wholesale production of CFCs. The business and consumer worlds adjusted relatively easily. As is now well known, that swift action came about because the presence of the ozone layer is fundamental for the existence of all life on the planet: without the ozone screen, we all die through overexposure to ultra-violet rays from the sun.

The issue of atmospheric carbon dioxide is every bit as deadly to all life, but for different reasons. Crucially, though, **the problem of increased atmospheric CO₂ is a long-term issue**: it's taken two centuries to reach 390 parts-per-million (ppm). It could take another fifty years or more to reach catastrophic levels (although, many argue now that we're already there). Who wants to wait that long to find out just how catastrophic a level we might reach? Who wants to see 400 ppm, or much worse?

Civilizations – always – must adjust, must modify, must adapt living conditions to assist survival, particularly when the **measurable evidence of danger is clearly unequivocal**.

Atmospheric CO₂, of course, is one half of the symbiotic relationship between plant and animal life, with oxygen being the other. We need both, but in **appropriate** quantities for optimum balance in nature. Too much of anything pollutes the environment, whatever and wherever it is: for example, too much **oxygen** for too long can have a disastrous effect upon your lungs. We can't do much about naturally occurring atmospheric CO₂ – except worsen it, indirectly, by devastating the forests. But we should do what we can about CO₂ emissions directly produced by human

industry – and pay the price. (And in concert with that, invest more in renewable energy, as many governments are doing.)

Frankly, I think anybody who disputes such needs should consider the state of the planet Venus – an extreme example for sure, but nevertheless a lesson about what happens when CO2 inevitably increases without check: a planet too hot to handle. Venus on Earth is unlikely, however; but, it's remotely possible in a distant future. Most importantly, it's a climate no sane person would want....

Hence, in my view, to do nothing about the increasing danger of excessive atmospheric CO2 is being socially insensitive, at best; at worst, such an attitude borders on gross, egocentric indifference or insanity – or both.

Copyright © 2011, Roger J. Burke, www.rogerjburke.com. All rights reserved.