

Bill Nye Is a Terrible Spokesman for Science



By Alex Berezow, PhD — May 13, 2019



Credit: Ed Schipul/Wikipedia [1]

When I was a kid, Bill Nye the Science Guy was a thing. I never watched his show (as I was too busy keeping up with Ren & Stimpy), but he seemed fun enough. If I could go back in time, I'd probably watch.

Some years later, Bill Nye experienced a resurgence in popularity. But instead of the old, nerdy-but-lovable Bill Nye, we got Bill Nye 2.0, a somewhat cantankerous scold who clearly knows less about science than he leads on.

It was clear that something was amiss a few years ago when, amid Nye's renewed celebrity status, it came to light that he aired an [episode](#) [2] of *Eyes of Nye* that perpetuated anti-GMO propaganda. Nye was subsequently [criticized](#) [3] by the scientific and (especially) science writing communities. Not long thereafter, [Nye had a change of heart](#) [4].

Good! Better late than never. But was this "conversion" based on a new understanding of biotechnology or simply a calculated marketing move? Evidence points toward the latter. As late as 2015, Nye was still pushing anti-GMO nonsense. That year, he published a book called *Undeniable*, which promoted evolution over creationism. The book entirely lacked references (quite bizarre for a science book), and despite GMO technology itself being "undeniable," Nye [wrote](#) [5] this:

"But there is something weird and unnatural about putting fish genes in fruit, in tomatoes. Nobody wanted it, so that research was abandoned.

I'll grant you, this could be a visceral reaction from ignorant consumers. Emotional

responses do not necessarily reflect scientific reality, as is evident in everything from creationism to the anti-vaccine movement. In this case, though, I think science and emotion are on the same side. There are very valid scientific reasons to approach GMOs with caution, and those turn out to dovetail with economic reasons. So far, it's not clear that investment in GMOs pays off. It is certainly not clear that GMO research should be funded with tax dollars.

By 2016, however, he was singing a different tune. Call me jaded and curmudgeonly, but his newfound faith in GMOs doesn't seem authentic.

Bill Nye, Prophet of Doom

In his latest [appearance](#) [6], Bill Nye had a cameo on John Oliver's show, in which he lit a globe on fire and dropped a few F-bombs. (I guess that passes as comedy.) He also said that Earth's temperature could rise by 4 to 8 degrees, presumably Fahrenheit, since Nye didn't indicate which scale he was using. His projection is [within the range predicted by the IPCC](#) [7], so at least he got that right.

But is setting a globe on fire an appropriate analogy to get the message across? Earth's temperature has gone up [1.4 degrees F since 1880](#) [8]. Undoubtedly, another 4 to 8 degrees is quite a lot in a short period of time. It doesn't take a master prognosticator to conclude that might cause some problems. But Earth is not -- nor will it ever be -- a flaming ball of fire. Earth isn't Venus.

Bill Nye 2.0

Ultimately, it seems that Bill Nye just panders to whatever he thinks the audience wants to hear. He thought (incorrectly) that they wanted to hear why GMOs were bad, so he altered his message when he got pushback. He won't get pushback for exaggerating climate change, so it's likely he'll keep this up for a while.

I don't think Nye actually believes the climate hysteria. Because if he did, Nye would support whatever means necessary to stop it, like nuclear power. After all, he's a mechanical engineer. But lo and behold, [Nye is opposed to nuclear power](#) [9]. Big surprise. Audiences don't like nuclear power.

Evolutionary biologist Jerry Coyne once [wrote](#) [10] of Bill Nye, "I'm not a fan of the new Science Guy, and see him as a self-aggrandizing person trying to capture his lost limelight more eagerly than he wants to promulgate science."

Unfortunately, I think that assessment is accurate. Bring back the old Bill Nye. Version 1.0 was better.

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2019/05/13/bill-nye-terrible-spokesman-science-14021>

Links

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Nye#/media/File:Bill_Nye.jpg

[2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKm2Ch3-Myg>

[3] <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/collideascape/2015/03/02/bill-nye-fixed-view-gmos-something-happened/#.XNoMGtNKgWo>

[4] https://www.realclearscience.com/blog/2016/10/why_bill_nye_changed_his_mind_on_gmos_109763.html

[5]

<https://books.google.com/books?id=983rAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA235&lpg=PA235&dq=There+is+something+BZHLsAT4i4HwAQ&ved=0CBQQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=There%20is%20something%20weird%20and%20>

[6] <https://www.newsweek.com/bill-nye-global-warming-adults-planet-fire-1423540>

[7] <https://www.wri.org/resources/data-visualizations/infographic-choose-your-future-4-possible-emissions-pathways>

[8] <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/world-of-change/DecadalTemp>

[9] <https://atomicinsights.com/why-doesnt-the-science-guy-like-nuclear-power-yet/>

[10] <https://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2014/11/17/bill-nye-challenged-to-debate-gmos/>