

Global Warming Activists as Villains for a Change: A Review of Michael Crichton's "State of Fear"

By ACSH Staff — January 3, 2005

Michael Crichton -- Michael Crichton, M.D., to be precise -- is of course well known for his techno-thrillers *The Andromeda Strain* and *Jurassic Park*, plus more than a dozen other novels and non-fiction works. *State of Fear* ^[1] (HarperCollins, 603 pages, \$27.95) is a little different. While constructed as a novel, it is also a guide to environmental issues and their advocates, principally the problem of climate change. It carries a message about global warming and will certainly have an important impact on the ongoing policy debate.

The message conveyed is two-fold:

--The scientific evidence does not support global warming fears -- or even the occurrence of a significant warming trend.

--The environmental movement and its well-paid leadership have jumped on the GW bandwagon because that's where the money is. The book mirrors real-life environmental activism, says Ronald Bailey, *Reason magazine* ^[2]'s science correspondent, in his book review for the *Wall Street Journal* (Dec. 10, 2004).

The scientific evidence is well presented, with numerous graphs and references, but more can be said. The climate has never been constant -- always either warming or cooling on all time scales (year-to-year, decadal, millennial, and over millions of years) -- independent of any human influence. While the observed pre-1940 warming is real and mostly natural (a recovery from the preceding Little Ice Age that terminated around 1850), the *cooling* from 1940 to 1975 is certainly not a greenhouse effect. The warming data reported during the past twenty-five years from surface stations (almost all of them on land) are likely contaminated by urban heat effects; we don't see such warming in the atmospheric record of weather balloons or from weather satellites that cover the whole globe on a regular basis (including the 70% covered by oceans). At most, human greenhouse effects would lead to a temperature rise by 2100 of a measly 0.8 degrees C.

Some claim that if climate is currently warming at 0.08 degrees C per decade, then temperatures will "increase between 4 degrees F and 10 degrees F by the end of this century" -- with all sorts of dire consequences. This remarkable demonstration of poor arithmetic assumes further that all of the current increase is due to human influences rather than natural ones -- and also ignores the fact that greenhouse theory predicts a less-than-proportional temperature increase with increasing carbon dioxide. My own considered estimate for 2100 is about 1 degree F -- based not on climate models but on the observed evidence.

The not-so-hidden message of *State of Fear*, spelled out in copious footnotes, a lengthy afterword, an appendix, and a twenty-page bibliography, is an oddly reassuring one for a Crichton book, even

if many scientists would disagree with it: There is no such thing as global warming, or at least nothing that anyone can prove or predict -- and when it comes to climatic change, the only thing we have to fear is fear itself, and the experts who are in the business of purveying it.

For good measure, Crichton's protagonist, "MIT professor on special leave" John Kenner, also delivers a number of mini-lectures challenging some of the Green movement's most cherished beliefs, arguing, for example, that DDT is safe enough to eat, that the giant sequoias are practically junk trees, and that the methane emitted by termites is potentially a greater hazard than the atmospheric buildup of carbon dioxide.

Throughout the novel and in the afterword, Crichton takes the opportunity to disparage a number of other widely-held fears. Fossil-fuel shortage? Not to worry, we'll come up with something. Population explosion? Nope, birth rates are coming down. [Cancer from power lines?](#) ^[3] Please, you've got to be kidding.

Fabricated Fears and Fully-Footnoted Fiction

Media reports I have seen (ABC, CNN, BBC) all emphasize the fact that the book is fiction, implying that readers should not believe the science either. But this would be a mistake. All scientific claims are backed by footnoted references to articles in science journals -- certainly an unusual feature for a novel.

In fact, there is still more evidence backing Crichton's message. Not only is current warming well below even the lowest limits given by the IPCC (the UN-appointed Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) but the IPCC claim (in its 2001 report) that the twentieth century was the warmest in a thousand years has turned out to be complete fiction -- based on mishandled data and faulty methodology.

The key is whether we can believe the climate predictions of the elaborate computer models quoted by the IPCC. First, the predicted temperatures span a range of over 400%. Even worse, none of the models can "hindcast" the climate observations of the past century. Models show the atmosphere warming more rapidly than the surface; data show the opposite. Models show the polar regions warming most rapidly; again -- no support from the data. (The Arctic "warming" reported in November 2004 by the inter-governmental Arctic Council has turned out to come from pieces of the Arctic gerrymandered to include areas that experienced strong warming; all previous publications show a cooling trend with maximum temperatures in the late 1930s.)

As the book points out, many influences on the climate are so poorly known that they have not been included in the models -- even though they could be important enough to change the sign of the outcome from warming to cooling. So, until the models are validated, it would be irresponsible to use them as a basis for far-reaching policy.

Turning Science into Adventure

Crichton's story starts out with a series of seemingly disconnected events in far-flung places -- Paris, Malaysia, London, Tokyo, Vancouver, Iceland, etc., and particularly California -- but gradually comes into focus as we discover that the National Environmental Resource Fund (NERF), a fictitious environmental organization, is planning a gigantic worldwide conspiracy: major

catastrophes to simulate imagined impacts of a sudden climate change. In contrast to the notorious eco-disaster movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, these disasters are carefully engineered by eco-terrorists and not at all connected to any climate change.

But our heroes, led by John Kenner, manage to scotch the nefarious doings of NERF and its egomaniacal chief, Nicholas Drake -- just barely. Drake and his minions want to surreptitiously trigger a series of natural disasters, including a supersize hurricane and a giant tsunami that would hit California with sixty-foot waves; these disasters would be timed to coincide with NERF's big media conference, thereby awakening the public to the dangers of climate change wrought by global warming.

In the process, Kenner and company survive all sorts of perils, from frostbite in Antarctica to multiple lightning strikes to captivity by cannibals in the South Pacific. It is an exciting story. I read it in essentially one sitting, broken only by a few hours of sleep.

State of Fear is on its way to becoming a bestseller and will be read by members of Congress (including, we hope, Senators McCain and Lieberman) and by politicians throughout the world (including, we hope, Britain's science adviser, Sir David King). Although the author displays no political agenda, his book will strengthen the position of President Bush (and most of the U.S. Senate) in turning down the Kyoto Protocol. This may account for the rather negative book review in the *New York Times* and the gnashing of teeth by environmental bloggers.

Crichton vs. "Consensus"

What, then, is Crichton's agenda? Hugely successful and nearing retirement age, why would he want to stick his neck out instead of playing it safe? There are certain clues, many of which appear in his widely quoted [Michelin Lecture](#) ^[4] at CalTech.

He disparages what passes for "consensus" science. He would have fun with a current controversy started by a University of California professor. In an article in *Science*, Naomi Orekes claims that there is a "complete scientific consensus" about global warming, based on a literature search she conducted. She was later forced to admit that she used the wrong key words in her search, but that did not stop her from later publishing an op-ed in the *Washington Post* (Dec. 26, 2004) making the same outrageous claim.

I suspect that Michael Crichton is motivated by the same anger as so many of us who don't want to see science misused for political purposes -- or used just to gain grants from government and foundations. These are the sentiments that led to the founding of my organization, [the Science and Environmental Policy Project](#) ^[5]. I was therefore pleased to see the great respect paid by Crichton to the late UCal professor Aaron Wildavsky, a founding director of SEPP.

Tellingly, the book points out that critics of the "consensus" and skeptics about global warming tend to be mainly retired academics -- scientists who are no longer in the rat race for tenure, research grants, and career-building honors.

As Crichton states disarmingly (p.573): "Everybody has an agenda. Except me." Well, there are a few others like him. The hundreds of scientific skeptics who have signed the Heidelberg Appeal, Leipzig Declaration, and Oregon Petition against junk science share the same agenda as Crichton.

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Editor's note: Another new book about the twisting of science worth noting is [The Lobotomist](#) [7] by Jack El-Hai, about tragic psychosurgery pioneer Walter Freeman.

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[4] http://www.crichton-official.com/speeches/speeches_quote04.html

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