

Feb 1, 2007

Dear Editor,

Letters this week by Steve Golly and Curtis Senterson express surprise at the recent cold snap and wonder whether "global cooling" is the real problem. Observations like these provide an excellent illustration of why the science of climate change is not performed by looking out one's kitchen window.

Although apparently written in jest, the authors perpetuate serious misconceptions about climate change. The climate can be thought of as a balanced kinetic system which has energy input (solar radiation), and energy loss (to space) moderated by cloud cover, ocean circulation, ice sheet cover, atmospheric particulates and concentrations of greenhouse gases. Scientists are in agreement that careful measurements averaged over the planet show significant warming over the last hundred years, with a dramatic increase in the last few decades. In short, temperature extremes cannot be used to characterize global temperatures, unless one averages globally. Interestingly, larger extremes in weather are expected from global warming because, as one adds energy to a kinetic system, statistical fluctuation will produce greater variation on a local scale. Therefore more cold, more heat and more rain is to be expected regionally from global warming. Running our SUVs around the block is only going to exacerbate these effects.

If, due to a convergence of El Nino and global warming effects, this summer does see predicted record temperatures throughout the northern hemisphere, I expect that there will be a conspicuous silence from the authors on global warming, but again for exactly the wrong reason: looking out one's kitchen window.

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