

Looking Ahead

Drowning Polar Bears

We are in the midst of a major effort by environmental activists, sympathetic scientists, and supporters in the media to hammer home to the American public the reality and dangers of global warming. The extent and intensity of this campaign is breathtaking, with just about every major print and broadcast news outlet running stories on climate change. *Time* magazine offered up a “Special Report on Global Warming”; the cover featured a forlorn polar bear surrounded by melting ice and the words “Be Worried. Be Very Worried.” *Vanity Fair* put celebrities like Julia Roberts and George Clooney on its cover in goofy green outfits to show how it’s oh-so trendy to be eco-friendly. “Green is the new black,” the magazine tells us, while its ads try to sell us SUVs.

Vanity Fair paid a special tribute—as did *Time*, *60 Minutes*, and others—to James Hansen, the NASA climate researcher who complained to the *New York Times* that the Bush administration was muzzling him. (See “Censoring Scientists?” on page 109.) Three years ago, Hansen revealingly wrote that it “may have been appropriate at one time,” “when the public and decision-makers were relatively unaware of the global warming issue,” for scientists to emphasize “extreme scenarios,” but that now “the need is for demonstrably objective” climate scenarios. Translation: If you want to get people’s attention, it’s okay to scare them by going beyond objective science, at least for a while. Environmental activists understand this, like the one who recently told the *New York Times* that his group is actively looking for “pictures of drowning polar bears” to rile up the public. And politically-active scientists understand this, too—like Donald Kennedy, editor of the journal *Science*, who recently wrote the following about last year’s devastating Hurricane Katrina: “Not only is the New Orleans damage not an act of God; it shouldn’t even be called a ‘natural’ disaster,” because it was so clearly the result of man-made global warming. Scientific research does not conclusively support that assertion, but that doesn’t matter to those who have tried for decades to pin so-called “extreme weather” on global warming.

It seems unlikely that the current global warming publicity-push was formally coordinated. And it isn’t clear what political impact, if any, it will have on the 2006 congressional elections or the 2008 presidential election. One thing that is clear, though, is that the eco-apocalyptic browbeating will continue for months. *An Inconvenient Truth*, the new documentary featuring Al Gore (tagged as “the most terrifying film you will ever see”) will be in theaters in May; the former vice president, who likely still harbors presidential ambitions, will no doubt squeeze it for every possible ounce of publicity.

Global-warming skeptics are surely not innocent of twisting science. But those of us who hope for sensible environmental reforms—who take the dangers of ecological degradation seriously, but also seek to safeguard against extreme solutions to speculative problems—should lament the distortions and scaremongering that are less likely to stir the public to action than to make people just tune out.