

The poor are carrying the cost of today's climate policies

By Matt Ridley, from *The Rational Optimist*, 1 October, 2017

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Climate policies are doing more harm than good, a moral issue

This is the text of a chapter I wrote for a new book entitled [Climate Change - The Facts 2017](#), edited by Jennifer Marohasy. The book is worth buying for Clive James's chapter alone.

Here is a simple fact about the world today:

- climate change is doing more good than harm.

Here is another fact:

- climate change policy is doing more harm than good.

These are both well-established facts, supported by a great deal of data, as I will demonstrate. Do these facts surprise you? It's certainly not the impression most politicians, scientists or journalists give. Yet the well-informed ones would not deny it if pressed. They would merely insist, instead, that this position will reverse later in the 21st century and that by then climate change, unchecked, will be doing more harm than climate policy. The eventual ends will begin to justify the painful means.

They may be right; we will see. But, today, we are deliberately causing suffering in partly futile efforts to stop something that is currently doing more good than harm, mostly to poor people.

And that should give us pause, at the very least. Is it right to ask today's poorest people – on whom the pain of climate policies fall most heavily – to make sacrifices for the sake of tomorrow's probably much richer people? Yet even to ask this question is to run a gauntlet of abuse from people, mostly paid by taxpayers, who accuse you of moral failings.

On no other topic that I write about do I get such vitriol and bitter criticism of my morality. When I made the argument on television once that climate change policy was hurting the poor, a prominent and wealthy left-wing commentator replied, 'But what about my grandchildren?' I am genuinely baffled as to why is it considered virtuous to cause pain to poor people today, and reward rich people, for the sake of the rich people's perhaps-even-richer grandchildren.

Eugenicists and population control advocates, incidentally, have made the same argument; we must harden our hearts and do painful things today for the sake of posterity.

During the great Irish famine, Charles Trevelyan, the Assistant Secretary to the Treasury in London, who had been a pupil of Malthus, called starvation an 'effective mechanism for reducing surplus population', adding: 'Supreme Wisdom has educes permanent good out of transient evil.'

In 1912 Leonard Darwin, son of Charles, argued, 'if wide-spread eugenic reforms are not adopted during the next hundred years or so, our Western Civilization is inevitably destined to such a slow and gradual decay as that which has been experienced in the past by every great ancient civilization'.

The ecologist Paul Ehrlich is an unabashed advocate of coercion to achieve population control, having said that to achieve it 'the operation will demand many apparently brutal and heartless decisions. The pain may be intense.' He called this 'coercion in a good cause'.

California's forced sterilisation programs in the 1920s, Germany's mass murders in the 1940s, India's semi-compulsory sterilisations in the 1960s, and China's one-child policy in the 1980s all justified huge suffering on the grounds that they would benefit future generations. Yet the demographic transition showed that the best way to reduce population growth is to be kind, not cruel; once babies survive, people plan smaller families.

My argument is not to be confused with the claim that climate change is not happening. Of course it is. Nor with the claim that it is all natural; I think it is highly likely that the increase in concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) over the past half century from an average of about 0.03% to an average of 0.04% of the atmosphere, small though it is, has had a warming effect. I am a card-carrying member of the overwhelming consensus that climate change is real and partly man-made. I also concede that climate change probably does already cause some harm in some places. The point is rather that the harm is currently smaller than the good it is doing, through longer growing seasons, milder winters, slightly higher rainfall, and faster growth rates of crops and forests because of CO₂ fertilisation. And that net good stands in stark contrast to the net harm caused by climate change policy.

The biggest way in which CO₂ emissions do good is through global greening. Ranga Myneni and colleagues (Zaichun et al. 2016) recently published evidence derived from satellite data showing that 25 to 50% of the vegetated parts of the planet has grown greener and just 4% browner, and that 70% of the greening can be attributed to an increased level of CO₂. The overall increase in green vegetation, which has occurred in all kinds of habitats – from the tropics to the Arctic, from deserts to farmland – is now estimated to be 14% during the last 30 years. This startling fact is confirmed by multiple other lines of evidence: tree growth rates; free-air concentration experiments in which the CO₂ level is enhanced over crops and natural habitats; increases in the amplitude of the CO₂ changes in the Northern Hemisphere each year; and so on.

Dr Zaichun Zhu from Peking University, the lead author of the Myneni paper (2016), described these results as follows: 'The greening over the past 33 years reported in this study is equivalent to adding a green continent about two times the size of mainland USA (18 million km²), and has the ability to fundamentally change the cycling of water and carbon in the climate system.'

Now just imagine if Zhu and Myneni had discovered the opposite: a 14% reduction in overall plant productivity over 30 years with browning in 37% of pixels and greening in only 4%. Most politicians, scientists, and journalists would have been screaming about it from the rooftops as an example of the harm caused by climate change. Behold the inherent bias towards suppressing good news that has plagued all debates about the environment for the past half century, and which has systematically misled the public. As I have consistently argued for years, the failure of doomsday predictions again and again is highly relevant data in this debate. But it is routinely ignored.

But back to global greening: if there is 14% more vegetation on the planet than 30 years ago, and 70% of this can be directly attributed to CO₂ fertilisation, this means there is more food for humans, animals, microbes, and fungi, and less land is needed to grow human food. Therefore, more land is available for nature than would otherwise have been the case if we had not raised CO₂ levels. It means richer biodiversity and less drought. It means lower food prices and less starvation. It means richer rainforests and less desert.

For many years, Dr Craig Idso has been quietly and systematically collating the evidence as to how much faster crops have grown as a result of the CO₂ increase, detailing the many experiments that show very clearly that a higher CO₂ level makes plants more resistant to droughts – because they need to open their pores less and they lose less water as a result (Idso

& Idso 2011). He has estimated the increased value of the world's crops as a result of the CO2 fertilisation effect – over 30 years this increase comes to US\$3.2 trillion (Idso 2013). That's \$3,200,000,000,000.

Now if you argue that coal producers – like the one operating on my family's land, so, yes, I declare an interest – should be paying recompense for the damage they have done the world, you must also admit that they can take into account any benefit they have done. It's the net cost that counts. At the moment, it is mathematically indisputable that farmers owe coal producers a huge sum for supplying them with free CO2 fertiliser. The burning of fossil fuels has boosted farm yields.

Incidentally, the CO2 fertilisation effect seems to be working in the sea as well as on land. Some studies of eelgrasses (Palacios & Zimmerman 2007), seaweeds, other marine algae, and also corals (D'Olivio et al. 2013) indicate a positive effect from CO2 enrichment. So do some studies of phytoplankton, which are responsible for much marine photosynthesis.

One laboratory experiment grew two strains of a diatom species and a coccolithophore species at 390 ppm and 750 ppm and found that 'increased CO2 led to increased growth rates in all three strains ... enhancing growth rates 20%–40%.' They concluded that 'there could be a net increase in capacity for primary productivity at 750 ppm of CO2, at least with regard to small diatoms and coccolithophores in coastal environments' (McCarthy et al. 2012).

Furthermore, numerous studies suggest that the slightly lower pH of seawater resulting from CO2 enrichment does not seem to adversely affect growth rates in such calcifying phytoplankton. For example, one study concluded that 'the coccolithophore, *E. huxleyi*, has an ability to respond positively to acidification with CO2 enrichment'. This 'suggests that physiological activities of *E. huxleyi* cells will not be seriously damaged by ocean acidification at least up to 1200 ppm CO2 in the atmosphere' (Fukuda et al. 2014). Another study concluded that 'carbonate chemistry is not the sole and overriding control over coccolithophore calcification', and that this should, 'seriously call into question' the notion that 'ocean acidification will lead to a replacement of heavily calcified coccolithophores by lightly-calcified ones' (Smith et al. 2012).

Laboratory experiments using a common reef-building coral found that its growth rate increased as the CO2 level was raised and remained high even with a CO2 level of 0.06%, that is to say, half again as high as today's.

Global warming itself has benefits for people, too. They include: fewer winter deaths; lower energy costs; better agricultural yields; probably fewer droughts because of increased rainfall; and maybe richer biodiversity. These turn out to be real and large effects.

Climate change policies

The policies designed to slow global warming, meanwhile, have huge costs. Let me walk you through the details in case you are doubtful. Here are ten examples of the harm done by policies designed to solve the problem of climate change.

1. Ethanol subsidies

Ethanol subsidies in the United States, Brazil and in Europe were introduced specifically and explicitly to reduce CO2 emissions. Yet they did environmental harm. As *Bloomberg* (2016) reports:

The Natural Resources Defense Council used a 96-page report in 2004 to proclaim boundless biofuel benefits: slashed global warming emissions, improved air quality and more wildlife

habitat. Instead, farmers ploughed millions of acres of prairie grasses to grow corn for making ethanol, with fertilizer runoff contributing to a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. Scientists warned that carbon dioxide emissions associated with corn-based ethanol were higher than expected.

And they did very little if anything to reduce emissions.

Ethanol has now displaced a bit more than 0.5% of world oil use. This ethanol conversion consumes about 5% of the world's grain crop, which in turn raises food prices. The United Nations (UN) Food and Agriculture Organization produced a report concluding it was one of the main reasons that the price of food shot up in 2008, and stayed high for some years afterwards until harvests began to catch up, worsening malnutrition and starvation, and encouraging the destruction of rain-forest to cultivate more land. The policy of ethanol subsidies steals land from nature. Worse, it steals food from poor people and puts it in rich people's cars.

Indur Goklany has estimated that this policy kills almost 200,000 people a year (Bryce 2010). As a farm owner, I probably benefit a little bit from these programmes, so I have no vested interest in criticising them. But that's not going to stop me.

2. Biodiesel programmes

Biodiesel programmes for making motor fuel from palm oil in the tropics, and from rapeseed oil in Europe, are all subsidised by the European Union specifically to reduce emissions, but they actually increase them. Transport & Environment, a green group, has calculated that by 2020, biodiesel will increase emissions from transport by 4% compared with using fossil-diesel, equivalent to putting an extra 12 million cars to the road (Gosden 2016). The subsidies also encourage the destruction of rainforest and the cultivation of land that would otherwise be available to nature. As a farm owner, I probably benefit slightly from this harmful policy.

3. The promotion of diesel cars

Europe mandates the promotion of diesel cars through the tax system as a deliberate policy to reduce CO₂ emissions. Diesel engines have lower CO₂ emissions than petrol engines, but higher emissions of nitrogen oxides and particulate emissions, which are more dangerous.

A study by Steve Yim and Steve Barrett (2012) determined that there were nearly 5000 deaths each year caused by these type of vehicle emissions. This policy, therefore, exacerbated this issue, contributing to these deaths. The scandal only came to light when it emerged that Volkswagen and other car manufacturers cheated on the emissions tests. As a diesel car driver, I benefited from this lethal policy.

4. Burning pellets derived from wood products

Britain is now burning pellets derived from wood products in power stations to produce electricity. The pellets, euphemistically called 'biomass', are harvested from forests in South Carolina and other parts of the United States (Ernstig 2015). Contrary to popular myth, these are derived not from wood by-products of a harvest primarily taken for other purposes, but from roundwood. Wood residues are used to dry the biomass prior to pelletisation (Stephenson & MacKay 2014; Rose 2015).

Burning wood produces more CO₂ than burning coal, for every unit of energy generated. It also encourages deforestation and habitat destruction, raises the price of electricity for consumers, and requires shipping combustible material a third of the way around the world. That wood regrows but coal does not is of little comfort given that wood takes several decades

to regrow. As a landowner, this policy helps me; the higher price of wood has helped reduce my losses on managing woodland. But it also hurts me because I make money from coal.

5. Wind power

Many countries have littered their rural beauty spots with 120-metre towers of steel, standing in massive reinforced concrete bases and equipped with electrical dynamos, whose two-ton magnets are about 50% rare-earth metals – usually neodymium, which is mined and refined in a very dirty process in China with toxic and radioactive waste as a by-product. These windmills produce expensive, unreliable, and intermittent electricity far from where and when it is needed, requiring expensive back-up power, and costly and unsightly power lines. They are subject to huge subsidies, which go mostly to the rich, including landowners like me, and which hit the poor harder than taxes would do because the money for these subsidies are levied on electricity bills. Indeed, I get some income from a wind turbine built on land I do not own but for which I have the mineral rights, beneath. They kill thousands of rare birds of prey, gannets, swifts, and other soaring birds, as well as large numbers of bats. And they do very little to reduce emissions (Fisher & Fitsimmons 2013; Hughes 2012; Ridley 2012).

6. Solar farms

In cloudy Britain and Germany very large sums have been diverted from relatively poor people to wealthy landowners to cover good agricultural land with solar farms, which produce very little electricity, and do so mainly when it is least needed on warm summer afternoons. These solar farms shade the ground preventing the growth of plants that could feed either people or wildlife. They also mean less land is available for nature. Their contribution is trivial; to the nearest whole number, solar power still produces zero percent of global energy needs. As a landowner, I have been offered large annual incomes for installing solar plants. To the consternation of my accountant, I have refused them. At last a climate policy that has not benefited me.

7. Renewables, only

Western governments, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank have all said that to avoid increasing emissions they are no longer willing to grant aid for the building of fossil-fuel plants in the poorest countries. They prefer to spend the money on renewables instead, where it goes less than half as far. The result is that the death toll of those who die as a result of cooking over open wood and dung fires for lack of electricity – currently about three million people a year – will not fall as fast as it should, while millions more are missing out on the benefits of electricity, including refrigeration and education.

The Center for Global Development has estimated that US\$10 billion invested in gas-fired generation in sub-Saharan Africa would meet the needs of 90 million people. The same sum spent on renewable energy technology would help just 27 million people (Moss & Leo 2014). The overall conclusion from this study was that more than 60 million additional people in poor nations could gain access to electricity if investment were allowed in natural gas projects, not just renewables.

8. Fuel poverty

The effect of renewable energy is to drive many poorer people into fuel poverty, so that they struggle to stay warm in cold winters. Today, throughout the world, far more people die of cold than of heat. One study (Public Health England 2014) concluded that winter deaths exceeded summer deaths in all 31 European countries, on average by 14%, and the total excess winter deaths between 2002–03 and 2010–11 was more than two million. On average, 65

British people a day are dying because they cannot afford to heat their homes properly. So climate change helps to reduce winter mortality; climate change policy helps to increase it again.

9. High energy costs

The high energy costs resulting from climate policies have resulted in the closure of heavy-industrial plants throughout Britain and other parts of western Europe, throwing many thousands out of work (Montford 2015). Few emissions savings have resulted, however, because many of the jobs have simply moved to China and India. The total cost of Britain's climate policies during the 21st century is on course to reach £1.8 trillion. The total benefit from that spending is expected to be a lowering of the average temperature by about 0.005 °C — that's half of one-hundredth of a degree. And for that we are destroying industry.

10. The neglect of more serious environmental problems

The immense diversion of political energy and finance into studying and mitigating climate change has starved attention from far more imminent, serious and soluble environmental problems, such as invasive plant and animal pests, habitat loss, and the over fishing of the oceans. These are neglected and underfunded because so much money and prestige is spent on climate change.

Conclusion

I could go on, but you get the point. Climate policies really hurt people and the planet.

Notice, by the way, that the beneficiaries of these policies are mostly comparatively rich people: landowners, investors, scientists, policy advisers, the employees of non-profit organisations (NGO). The victims are mostly poor people: subsistence farmers, poorer pensioners, manual workers. None of this is controversial, let alone imaginary. All these effects are real. Environmentalists concede that these things are happening. Some claim that they are justified because they will avert future disasters. Indeed, some claim such disasters are already upon us.

But are they? There has been no increase in extreme weather: no trend towards stronger or more frequent storms, no consistent change in the occurrence or intensity of tornadoes or cyclones or lesser storms. The IPCC has confirmed this again and again. The cost of storm damage has increased, but this is entirely due to the increase in the value of property, not the worsening of storms. Indeed, as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) storm damage has been falling, not rising. Flooding is worse in many parts of the world, but largely because of land-use changes – usually deforestation or drainage – causing run-off to be more rapid.

As for droughts, there has been, if anything, a very slight *decline* in the frequency and severity of drought over recent decades, while famine has largely vanished from the face of the Earth for the first time in recorded history, except under a few autocratic regimes like that of North Korea. The vast famines that plagued the twentieth century are not happening in the 21st.

Again, these facts have been confirmed by the IPCC itself.^{[1][5]} In its latest report, it backs off claims made in its previous one:

The most recent and most comprehensive analyses of river runoff do not support the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report (AR4) conclusion that global runoff has increased during the 20th century. New results also indicate that the AR4 conclusions regarding global increasing trends in droughts since the 1970s are no longer supported. There is low confidence in a global-scale observed trend in drought or dryness (lack of rainfall), owing to lack of direct observations,

dependencies of inferred trends on the index choice and geographical inconsistencies in the trends.

As far as we can tell – the interpretation of global sea-level data is not straightforward because of changes in techniques and adjustment for local tectonic factors – sea level has not risen much faster, if at all, in the past three decades than it did in most of the past century. Satellites suggest it is currently going up at about 34 cm a century – which is about 3.4 mm a year. Small, uninhabited islands are sometimes lost to the sea mainly because of tectonic sinking rather than sea-level change. A study by Webb and Kench (2010) of 27 coral atolls in the central Pacific over several decades found that more atolls increased in size than decreased, despite rising sea levels. As they stated, it is in the nature of atolls to rise with sea level through coral growth and sand accumulation: ‘Islands are geomorphologically persistent features on atoll reef platforms and can increase in island area despite sea-level change’ (Webb & Kench 2010).

Arctic sea ice has declined in summer, but Antarctic sea ice has increased, and the decline in Arctic sea ice has had no measurable deleterious effect on either people or polar bears. Indeed, the trend in polar bear numbers is not down and may be upward as they recover from past hunting. Most glaciers have retreated, as they have since about 1850 (that is, before man-made climate change), but again without significant impact on human welfare.

So, it is very clear that climate change has done very little harm so far and is doing very little harm today. On balance it has done net good. As I explained in the beginning, most well-informed politicians, journalists and scientists accept that this is the case. So, does the IPCC. They all say the damage will nearly all be in the future. So I am not saying anything controversial here, let alone outside the consensus.

Studies of the ‘social cost of carbon’ and of the economic impacts of climate change on average find that climate change is not yet doing net harm, and will only do so when the temperature reaches about 2 °C above pre-industrial levels. The IPCC confirmed this in its latest assessment report. The opening words of the executive summary of Chapter 10 of Working Group 2’s report reads (Field et al. eds. 2014):

For most economic sectors, the impact of climate change will be small relative to the impacts of other drivers (*medium evidence, high agreement*). Changes in population, age, income, technology, relative prices, life- style, regulation, governance, and many other aspects of socioeconomic development will have an impact on the supply and demand of economic goods and services that is large relative to the impact of climate change.

Globally, climate change policy is doing harm, while climate change is doing good. Locally, in the poorest countries, the effect can be even more stark. Here the pain of policy is most acute and the gain of changing the concentration of atmospheric CO₂ is most dramatic.

Take Niger, the fourth poorest country in the world with a per capita GDP about 1% of Britain’s. One reason for that poverty is the very low level of energy available to Niger’s people, final energy consumption being one of the lowest in the world. The small amount of electricity available to a small proportion of the population comes from one tiny coal-fired power station, some diesel power stations, and an interconnector from Nigeria. About 90% of Niger’s households depend on wood for cooking – which means appalling levels of premature death from smoke inhalation. The government has this to say:

Butane gas or LPG, a fuel currently available in sufficient quantity in Niger (44,000 tons per year) and which should be the solution to replace firewood as cooking fuel used by households, requires the acquisition of accessories for its use. These are accessories that, although available

on the market, are not within the reach of low-income households and thus many in Niger have no other choice than to make use of traditional energy sources (Gado 2015).

So, thousands of lives could be saved, and living standards raised if the aid money could be used to buy butane stoves. That would stop the continuing devastation of Niger's forests and scrublands, too. Instead, many westerners insist that Niger must go green: 'Niger needs to develop an energy policy that embraces renewables as part of a longer-term energy vision,' says the International Renewable Energy Agency (2013). Wood is, of course, renewable, but that is not what they mean. Wind and solar power are dreadfully expensive, as well as unreliable, and Niger cannot afford them. The refusal of the West to support fossil fuels in such countries kills people and damages the environment.

Niger has one thing in its favour. It is smack in the middle of the Sahel, the region that has seen the fastest global greening. Because of the increase in CO₂ in the air, as a result of the burning of fossil fuels, plants in this semi-arid area can now grow faster and lose less water from the pores in their leaves as they do so: water efficiency improves. An increase in rainfall in the Sahel is also a result of global warming.

'Recent trends show good signs on the recovery of the region, and the relative vegetation index (NDVI) presented for the country of Niger in this map shows increases in the period from 1982 to 1999,' reads a recent report (Ahlenius 2006). Some imaginative land-management policies have helped. So Niger has seen an increase in woody vegetation, even as its people desperately chop away at it to provide themselves with cooking fuel.

Niger is a perfect example of the horrible hypocrisy of the climate establishment. Niger's extreme poverty makes it vulnerable to the effects of climate policy; but it currently benefits from climate change itself.

I say to my greener friends:

- Where do you get your insouciance about the clear evidence that the poorest people in the world are the ones hardest hit by climate change policy today?
- Where do you get your indomitable certainty that the end justifies these means?
- Where do you find the evidence that we must cause certain pain to today's poor in order to forestall the small possibility of suffering among tomorrow's rich?
- And where do you find the hubris to occupy the moral high ground?

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