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"Noble Cause Corruption"

TIA Daily Talks with Anthony Watts about What Is Distorting Climate Science

by Tom Minchin

Climate science depends utterly on the integrity of its measurements. In order to extrapolate and make forecasts, there can be no errors in the data. How reliable are the measurements climate scientists use? What happens if their measuring apparatus is altered by something as simple as a coat of paint that lifts the average recordings? Will anyone spot it? And if someone does, what happens if such a desired result matters more than getting the facts straight?

An expert on these questions, Anthony Watts, founder of the most widely visited climate site in the world, the US-based [Watts Up With That](#), (47.3 million hits since the fall of 2007, compared with the leading alarmist site RealClimate's 11.7 million since December 2004), is wrapping up his June tour Down Under at the moment. TIA Daily caught up with him in Melbourne.

At the start of the interview, Watts, a former TV weatherman, confirmed that he did not begin as a skeptic. As he put it himself with typical bluntness, "I started out actually just being a climate alarmist. I got involved with saving the planet by helping other weather forecasters do the same thing through planting trees. Then when I met the State climatologist in California, his data changed my mind and now I'm a skeptic."

Watts was not content to let his view rest on someone else's data. He researched the matter in a wholly original way. Talking to him it became clear just how plain honesty and an inquiring mind are fatal to the alarmist cause. His alertness to measurement problems began well before his skepticism.

"When I was in college one of the first jobs I had was to assemble a Stevenson Screen [the slatted box on stilts that protects meteorological instruments from undue influences, widely used up until 1984], and I remember the whitewash coming off in my hand. I'd always wondered about that. My professor told me we couldn't change it because even though it was an inferior coating that flaked off, it just couldn't be changed. Then when I learned in 1979 that the Weather Bureau *had* changed the specification to latex I wondered if that made a difference—and there didn't seem to be anything in the literature about it. And so as I'd often wondered about it, I finally got around to doing the experiment, and when I did the experiment I discovered that there was indeed a

difference, a significant difference [a thermometer in a latex painted screen records a higher average temperature], which was as large as the agreed upon global warming signal. So that sparked my interest. And then when I went to visit screens to test the paint issue, I discovered stations were poorly sited. And so that grew into a larger situation."

It is interesting to see how an active mind makes connections. From a simple concern about flaking whitewash and a response to it by a professor who knows that a standard must be kept constant, a thinker can make the choices to become a global leader in exposing climate fraud and distortion. He continued:

"Initially the screens were probably in the right locations, because when a lot of these stations were started there was less urbanization. There was more open space and thus there were more choices available to place them in an open space. However, urbanization built up around a lot of these thermometers. Then when the observer may have died—some of the observers were volunteer observers, some of them were at organizations—or organizations closed, or some other reason would cause them to have to be moved, then there were less available places away from urbanization to move them to. And so gradually there became less and less space to put these things in—or urbanization grew up around them. So that's the key problem here: how much has the urbanization affected the signal?"

I asked him if his conclusion was that the signal was being distorted and thus that "the temperature record was unreliable." His answer was unequivocal:

"Right. The specification from the United States NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) and through their weather service, NWS—National Weather Service—has a simple rule called the 100 foot rule. And it basically says keep the thermometers away from influences such as concrete, asphalt, car parks, buildings, other heat generating phenomena—keep them away at least 100 feet. Our study in the United States showed that only one in ten met that rule."

So politicians are demanding unprecedented control over our lives based on only one in ten US measuring stations meeting minimum standards.

I asked him how he thinks the fight is going and about his website that is such a pivotal part of that fight. Forty-seven million hits since the fall of 2007 is an impressive number. How does he account for that level of interest?

"I think it's because we're discussing things other people are not. We have research that's original, we have a lot of highly skilled people that visit there, and we try to maintain decorum. One of the things that I don't have tolerance for is flame wars and trolls and all these sorts of things. You know, if we're going to have a discussion I want it to be reasonable and I want everyone to be able to participate. People that try to dominate discussions and so forth, I let them know they're doing it wrong and I give time outs from time to time and things of that nature. I enforce rules to maintain order and I think that's attractive to a lot of people."

I asked him if he was optimistic about the growth of skepticism. Does he think there is a rising tide?

"I do. The Climategate e-mails made a huge impact and they demonstrated a lot of the things that skeptics have been saying for years: that the scientists were actively sequestering data, not making it available when asked, and that they were treating people with genuine, reasonable questions like Steve McIntyre as people to be fought against. They were doing political science, not true physical science."

I asked him what he thinks the chances are of cap-and-trade passing in the United States Senate this year:

"Right now about 20 votes short of being passed. I don't think it will pass this year. However it may pass in the future. The reason I don't think it will pass this year is because we're coming up on a November election. The Democratic people know that they're under the gun, that there's a lot of dissent amongst the voters and that a lot of that anger is directed towards them and so I don't think they're going to do anything that's going to increase fuel taxes at this juncture. However, that being said they're very patient people and so I expect it to be back in one form or another even if it doesn't pass this year."

So the fight is very much alive. What drives it all? If politicians blindly pursue their agendas in order to look hip and increase their power, it's one thing. But I asked how climate professionals can excuse themselves and what he meant by a term he used to me: "Noble Cause Corruption." The term was originally a legal one. Its legal meaning is well [explained](#) by Steve Rothlein as follows:

There exists a serious threat to law enforcement, which can compromise the high ethical standards and values our profession has achieved during the past several decades. This threat is typically referred to as "Noble Cause Corruption."

Traditional corruption is defined as the use of one's official position for personal gain. The personal gain can be economic or otherwise, such as sexual favors. As a profession, we have long understood this type of abuse of power and, when discovered and investigated, those involved are arrested.

A less obvious but perhaps even more threatening type of misconduct in law enforcement is Noble Cause Corruption. This type of misconduct involves not necessarily the rotten apples in the agency but sometimes involves the best officers in the agency, or the golden apples. Noble Cause Corruption is a mindset or sub-culture which fosters a belief that the ends justify the means. In other words, law enforcement is engaged in a mission to make our streets and communities safe, and if that requires suspending the Constitution or violating laws ourselves in order to accomplish our mission, then for the greater good of society, so be it. The officers who adopt this philosophy lose their moral compass.

You can see why the term was adopted by Watts' friend Steve McIntyre of [Climate Audit](#). It is one Watts clearly likes. I asked him what he meant by it in the climate context. He replied:

"Noble Cause Corruption is a belief that what you're doing is so much more important than what anyone else is doing because your cause is noble, you're saving the planet, and because you're saving the planet, you are doing it for the good of mankind. Therefore your cause is much more important than everyone else's. There was a time when I actually felt that way, when I was doing a project related to planting trees, and having TV meteorologists plant trees back around 1990. It's easy to get caught up in that Noble Cause Corruption because it makes you feel good. It makes you feel important. It makes you feel powerful. And so all of those things combine to put a blinder on you as to what you're really doing."

It's a phenomenon TIA Daily readers know well from other forms of altruism run riot. Finally, I asked him what he would advise people to do if they want to push this debate towards a more open and scientific basis, away from the "true believers." He answered by defining the conflict:

"I would say this boils down to a war between the haves and the have-nots. The haves are the people that are getting all the funding. They're getting millions and millions of dollars of funding. The skeptics, we get scraps, we do things on our own. I funded most of the project on my own. And so who should you trust? People that are being paid for an opinion, paid for an output, versus someone who is not being paid for an output, and I think that's the question."

When those getting the funding are riddled with "Noble Cause Corruption" his point is unarguable.

His final recommendation was never to let an opportunity pass to engage:

"I think that if you want skeptics to have an even keel in the debate, skeptics need to push their position more often and that means writing more letters to the editor, to newspapers, to magazines and trade journals and to scientific journals. And, when there are people on the radio that are claiming things that are patently absurd, someone should be phoning in and calling them on it and not giving them a free pass."

There will be a lot fewer free passes if Watts' growing success has anything to do with it.

Tom Minchin is a writer, researcher, and businessman in Melbourne, Australia.

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