

## What Shall I Compare Thee To Now?

It is a fine summer morning.

There was a time when mornings like this were regarded as the epitome of beauty. When Shakespeare wanted to extol the beauty of his beloved, he compared her to a summer's day.

There was a time when religious people would regard a morning like this as a sign of divine grace. When they walked out and saw a day like today, they would pray – literally, pray – in thanks for it.

Today, the devotees of the prevailing religion regard a fine summer's day as nothing but an omen, as terrifying as comets and eclipses once were. To them, it signifies impending punishment for our hubris, for the wickedness of seeking to change the world for the better. If they are pleased at all, it is with glee at the portent of the disaster that will one day vindicate them. But basically they hate the summer's day. They finer the day, the more they hate it. Yet when they try to besmirch it, *it* remains clear and beautiful.

Sun, 07/30/2006 - 14:44 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

## What are you talking about? W

What are you talking about? Who hates summer days? Is it the Moon-God disciples? Priests of the Greek ski god Alpinios? Help me out here.

by a reader on Mon, 07/31/2006 - 06:30 | [reply](#)

## Re: What are you talking about?

**Think before you enjoy it.** Etc.

by [Editor](#) on Mon, 07/31/2006 - 08:36 | [reply](#)

## Oops. My mistake then. I read

Oops. My mistake then. I read religion and assumed it meant exactly that. This is why I shouldn't express myself so early in the morning.

That said, I have to point out that most people, including the most

die-hard of industrialists, don't really enjoy record-breaking heat in late July. Whatever the cause, once the summer morning has passed by and the summer day hits its stride, it's just not that nice to be outdoors, or even indoors sans AC, when all-time high temperature records are being replaced.

by a reader on Mon, 07/31/2006 - 11:22 | [reply](#)

## Who Has the Burden of Proof?

Is it incumbent upon those who believe that substantial global temperature increases are dangerous to prove this beyond a reasonable doubt?

Or should substantial global temperature increases be assumed dangerous to humanity, unless demonstrated false beyond a reasonable doubt?

by a reader on Mon, 07/31/2006 - 20:36 | [reply](#)

## Burden

Seems each proposition is true in some respects. If these are the only choices, reasonable doubt is an awfully high standard. A recipe for gridlock - perhaps not such a bad idea.

by [Michael Bacon](#) on Mon, 07/31/2006 - 23:10 | [reply](#)

## it's one thing to think that

it's one thing to think that very long term trends may be scary, and quite another to think a tiny data point today has anything at all to do with global warming. people who think they have "experienced global warming" or whatever are just proving they don't know how to think. temperatures fluctuate. get over it.

Elliot

by a reader on Fri, 08/04/2006 - 01:56 | [reply](#)

## What a ridiculous thing to sa

What a ridiculous thing to say.

*It is a fine summer morning.*

*There was a time when mornings like this were regarded as the epitome of beauty. When Shakespeare wanted to extol the beauty of his beloved, he compared her to a summer's day.*

Umm, OK. So he compared his beloved specifically to the hottest day on record, right?

Is it beauty proportional to the number of people dying of heatstroke?

*To them, it signifies impending punishment for our hubris, for the*

*wickedness of seeking to change the world for the better.*

Yeah right, because blowing the tops off of mountains and drilling for oil in the ANWR are things that make the world better. Only someone who truly hates progress and prosperity, worships Gaia and pines for the days when we lived in houses made of mud could wish for renewable sources of energy, or be alarmed at the prospect of the Earth reverting to a mesozoic climate within a few centuries.

by a reader on Fri, 08/04/2006 - 18:55 | [reply](#)

## **a "renewable source of energy"**

a "renewable source of energy" really means wanting to never have to solve energy related problems again. this is not possible, anti-progress, and very bad. thinking and problem solving are good and not to be avoided. BTW we already invented nuclear power. it's pretty cool.

FYI most of those heat stroke deaths are people who would have died in the next few days anyway.

Elliot

by a reader on Fri, 08/04/2006 - 19:44 | [reply](#)

## **What if...**

What if the number of heat stroke deaths in summer goes up but the number of hypothermia deaths in winter goes down by more?

by **David Deutsch** on Fri, 08/04/2006 - 19:56 | [reply](#)

## **Elliot: So is the water cycle**

Elliot: So is the water cycle an affront to your belief system?

David: Touché. I have no adequate response within the microcosm-debate of heatstroke vs hypothermia.

There is however a good a priori, non-ideological reason to think that large-scale global warming is more likely to be A Bad Thing than A Good Thing. It's essentially the same as the reason why a large mutation is overwhelmingly more likely to be bad than good for an organism.

by a reader on Fri, 08/04/2006 - 22:27 | [reply](#)

## **Large mutation**

Nice argument, but I think there are some problems with it. One is: who says this is a "large" mutation? In evolutionary terms, calling a mutation large is just the same as saying that it is very likely to do harm, so the argument would be circular. Fortunately, though, you

don't need to say "large". Small mutations are *also* more likely to

do harm than good.

But how much harm? One could use your analogy to argue that there's a good a priori, non-ideological reason to think that large-scale global warming is most unlikely to be A Bad Thing. It's essentially the same as the reason why a small change in the environment is overwhelmingly likely to have a negligible effect on an organism: the organism is adapted, and hence near a local maximum of adaptation. So a small change in the conditions will produce only a second order change in the degree of adaptation. (Of course, the environment is not an organism and is not adapted to anything. But we are adapted, and so is our civilisation.)

And another possible way to apply the same sort of analogy is: a large change in the *global economy* of the kind required by interventionist solutions, is overwhelmingly likely to do more harm than good - actually for all the usual reasons, not just analogy with the evolution of organisms.

Finally, I fear analogies aren't going to get us very far. The real problem is that we don't understand the climate change process, or its effects, very well. That is why **I advocate a stance of problem fixing** in preference to the chimera of problem avoidance.

by **David Deutsch** on Fri, 08/04/2006 - 23:03 | [reply](#)

## Water Cycle

Water Cycle: Well, ultimately we are going to "re use" a lot of the atoms on Earth. But what renewable power means is: anything that requires atoms to start the process in a hard-to-create configuration is discarded as permanently unworkable. Why? Because people think we can't solve the problem of putting ever more atoms into that configuration. Of course we can. We can burn coal *\*forever\** if we want. So it's perfectly renewable.

What lefties want is something that would provide unlimited energy (though at a low rate per time. they don't seem to care about the consequences of limited energy per time) *\*without thinking\**. they want mechanical maintenance routines to work forever. they want us to never face a problem like a scarcity that requires creativity to solve. because they don't have optimism in human creativity.

Elliot

by a reader on Fri, 08/04/2006 - 23:21 | [reply](#)

## (Sigh)

So much ignorant nonsense in such a short thread (assuming you are talking about global warming - it's a little difficult to work out, among all the tendentious pseudo-arguments).

Destabilising the world's ecosystems is BAD. End of. The balance is so delicate, and we know so *f\*\*\** little about it, that playing silly buggers with it is akin to pointing a loaded pistol to your head and

saying: "Well, I know very little about kinematics, therefore I don't think the bullet is likely to hurt me - after all, Zeno has proved that an object can't REALLY move - ergo, it's a reasonable risk to take". And then pulling the trigger.

Incidentally: anti-science hysterics, a bunch not noted for a deep understanding of how science works, often accuse scientists of hubris, of saying (allegedly): "We know everything, and we are telling you global warming is a real danger".

Actually, it's quite the reverse; scientists by and large are saying: "We don't really know how the weather works, but we are making some worrying observations. The rise in CO2 concentrations - a measurable result of burning fossil fuels - is strongly correlated with rising temperatures. CO2 levels are rising faster and faster. Perhaps it's suggestive of an impending catastrophe, because we DON'T know what to do about it. And we can't work out the exact details of how the injection of heat energy is causing massive fluctuations in cycles such as hurricanes, to say nothing of melting ice-caps, but it's happening: maybe it would be prudent to think seriously about stopping this process?".

But hey, if humanity is dead set on destroying itself ...

by [yoni](#) on Sat, 09/09/2006 - 22:00 | [reply](#)

## 2nd-order changes

"the organism is adapted, and hence near a local maximum of adaptation. So a small change in the conditions will produce only a second order change in the degree of adaptation"

Proves nought. Second-order changes can be large enough to destabilise the system if they persist in spreading and growing. It's not what order it is, but what magnitude it is. Just because something is growing linearly rather than quadratically (say) doesn't mean that it's benign, or that its magnitude won't soon exceed some critical threshold. Global warming is growing linearly (say): so?

by [yoni](#) on Sat, 09/09/2006 - 22:05 | [reply](#)

## Delicate

Yoni,

Why do you think the Earth's ecosystem is in a delicate balance?  
What are the signs that it's not very stable?

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/blog/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Sat, 09/09/2006 - 23:25 | [reply](#)

## Ecosystem

There are tons and tons and tons of examples to demonstrate this;

here is just one:

Within my small county in England, I am already seeing great changes in the prevalence of certain animal and plant species compared with only 10 years ago.

Certain quite common birds have given up migrating, because of the changed seasonal temperature patterns.

These changes affect other phenomena in turn (think insects, pollinated plants ...), both here and at the migration destinations.

I am not saying that a new balance won't be found, but the current balance is being disturbed and will flip into a different one. The process, and the end-result, is/will be stressful and potentially catastrophic to many species, including Homo sapiens.

The result could be the disappearance of many species, e.g. those who are already migrating northwards within Britain and may be squeezed out altogether by falling off the top of Scotland when their living space - which is temperature-delimited, to say nothing of their food which may also be temperature-delimited - disappears.

If the process goes on far enough, H. sapiens itself may disappear. Don't forget that the Maldives are shrinking, and London's flood defences are groaning. And we are very early in the process. Over the next 100 years - a mere blink - China will generate a huge amount of CO<sub>2</sub>.

Other examples abound. Judging by the 3 Gorges dam, China is hell-bent on creating other kinds of disasters. And look up what happened at the Aral Sea: if that's not an ecosystem destroyed by human intervention, I don't know what is.

If and when H. sapiens disappears at the end of the process, the system will stop drifting away from equilibrium and settle down to a new one. In the global scheme of things, that's all fine and dandy, but is that what you want?

by [Yoni](#) on Sun, 09/10/2006 - 11:00 | [reply](#)

## **Re: Ecosystem**

Is there a scientific study about the birds you've noticed? If so, please show us. If not, how do you know that you've really noticed anything? It could be coincidence, or you could have an unconscious bias, or you could have forgotten how many birds you saw in the past at this time of year, or how many there were a decade ago. Or your sample size may be too small to conclude anything, or there may be other causes you haven't investigated, or there could be a reason the bird changes indicate cooling temperatures. Without subjecting your theory to intense scientific criticism, you can't tell if it's any good or not.

I'm also curious which reasoned and articulate global warming advocates predicted these changes in bird migration. Or even, which ones predicted significant temperature changes would already be happening in 2006? I know some people said we are doomed by next week, but did any of the more scientifically oriented people say

that?

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/blog/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 09/10/2006 - 18:57 | [reply](#)

## Birds

"Is there a scientific study about the birds you've noticed? If so, please show us. If not, how do you know that you've really noticed anything? It could be coincidence, or you could have an unconscious bias, or you could have forgotten how many birds you saw in the past at this time of year, or how many there were a decade ago"

This borders on a smear, and certainly relies on sneering innuendo. It is not even remotely a serious comment.

All I will say is that I am a trained scientist, and that I have been taking part in the annual RSPB survey - which has a huge sample size - for many years.

That's already more than your patronising comments deserves.

by **Yoni** on Sun, 09/10/2006 - 23:07 | [reply](#)

## Science

Could you please direct me to the science surrounding bird movement that indicates either global warming or that the world ecosystem is delicate?

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/blog/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 09/10/2006 - 23:37 | [reply](#)

## Re: Ecosystem

You might find [this talk](#) illuminating.

by **Alan Forrester** on Thu, 09/21/2006 - 20:37 | [reply](#)

## Bird ecology and global warming

I assume Yoni was talking about the Pied Flycatcher... if not I'd be very interested to know what bird he was talking about.

Anyway, I have written up a [short summary](#) about the pied flycatcher on my own blog, with links to secondary sources which link to the original papers. Basically what is happening is that the pied flycatcher times its migration based on the length of days. Since that is a constant, its migration schedule stays constant. However, the caterpillars in Northern Europe that it depends on for food in the spring are being born earlier, because their life cycle is

tied to temperature. This means no food for the birds. Bad.

There are other effects. What about pollinator species and the plants they pollinate maturing at a different time? This has serious implications for the food chain.

Some trees produce fruit at a certain time of year. They have evolved to depend on migrating birds that pass by at that time to eat the fruit and spread the seeds. When timing gets thrown off, the trees don't spread.

by [Will](#) on Tue, 10/31/2006 - 13:57 | [reply](#)

## Stasis

So basically animal code is full of hacks and kludges and rules of thumb, and they break down if circumstances change. So to keep animals functional, we'll just have to make sure nothing ever changes.

-- Elliot Temple  
curi@curi.us

## Dialogs

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Tue, 10/31/2006 - 20:25 | [reply](#)

## stasis

Sort of. If the pace of environmental change outruns the ability of species to adapt, the results can be catastrophic.

by [Will](#) on Tue, 10/31/2006 - 20:37 | [reply](#)

## Catastrophe

Well, OK, but biological evolution is really, really, really slow. A few generations of humans is just a blink of the eye.

Now, you seem to say it'd be a catastrophe if some species went extinct. I have nothing against those birds or caterpillars. But we can't just halt progress for a tens of thousands of years, or more. That is just inviting the death of all species.

The only hope for survival for humans is to improve our science sufficiently before a gigantic meteor hits, or some other large scale disaster. We have a time limit. And if we die, all the other species will die too, when our sun goes. The only thing that could save them is if humans survive to either take them elsewhere, or to tinker with the sun.

Human progress is not only our only hope, it's the only hope of all the other species on Earth.

-- Elliot Temple  
curi@curi.us

## Dialogs

by **Elliot Temple** on Tue, 10/31/2006 - 21:21 | [reply](#)

## catastrophe

It seems we disagree on what a 'catastrophe' is. I think global warming and environmental destruction is indeed a real catastrophe, comparable to a meteor hitting the planet.

And I'm not saying that we should halt progress. I'm saying that we need to carefully consider our future and take measures to head off catastrophe.

But what if I was? What if progress means that billions of humans die off? Is that acceptable to you?

by **Will** on Tue, 10/31/2006 - 21:40 | [reply](#)

## I don't understand how you co

I don't understand how you compare catastrophes. In one case, all humans and all animals die. In the other, some animals die, a handful of humans die, and life is less comfortable. That's comparable?

Even if progress meant billions of humans dying, isn't that worlds better than all humans being dead, period?

-- Elliot Temple

curi@curi.us

**Dialogs**

by **Elliot Temple** on Tue, 10/31/2006 - 22:00 | [reply](#)

## catastrophe

Well for one thing, global warming appears to be human induced. We have no control over an asteroid that strikes us. It's like the difference between a lightning strike and a murder.

For another, stopping a meteor strike is relatively simple. Humans excel at delivering explosive power at a distance. Simply blow it to pieces or divert it. An easy technological challenge - and a straightforward one. There won't be endless debates about whether we should stop it or whether it's even happening.

Third: there's no evidence that a meteor would wipe out all life on earth. It's happened several times since life began on the planet without destroying all life, and I have no doubt humans would be among the survivors if there were any.

Fourth, we can see the evidence of environmental catastrophe all around us. There's no reason to believe a meteor will strike anytime in the near future. One is a clear and present danger.

by **Will** on Tue, 10/31/2006 - 22:12 | [reply](#)

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