4

Global scares, subjective science, and climatologists

4.1 GLOBAL SCARES

Global-warming alarmism can be viewed from the broader perspective of global scares as one in a series of panics that rise and often fall; global warming is still in the rise period. Booker and North (2007) documented the details of the rise and fall of various global scares ranging from a wide variety of food scares, to mad cow disease, to dioxins, to the millennium bug, to lead and asbestos, to passive smoking, and finally to global warming. (They failed to cover excessive quarantine of returning astronauts or depletion of the ozone layer by sea-surface temperatures (SSTs). In the introduction to their book Scared to Death, Booker and North defined the unifying characteristics of global scares:

“Each was based on what appeared at the time to be scientific evidence that was widely accepted. Each has inspired obsessive coverage by the media. Each has then provoked a massive response from politicians and officials, imposing new laws that inflicted enormous economic and social damage. But eventually the scientific reasoning on which the panic was based has been found to be fundamentally flawed. Either the scare originated in some genuine threat that had then become wildly exaggerated, or the danger was found never to have existed at all.”

By now, however, the damage has been done. The costs have amounted in some cases to billions, even hundreds of billions, of pounds, imposing an enormous hidden drain on the economy. Yet almost all of this money has been spent, it turns out, to no purpose.

What does it say about the psychology of our time that such an extraordinary thing can happen, not just once, but again and again? When we examine the pattern behind these scares, we find further elements that each has in common:

- The source of the supposed danger must be something universal, to which almost anyone in the population might be exposed, such as eggs or beef, asbestos, or climate change.
The nature of the danger it poses must be novel—a threat that has never appeared in this form before.

While the scientific basis for the scare must seem plausible, the threat must also contain a powerful element of uncertainty. It must in some way be ill-defined, maximizing the opportunity for alarmist speculation as to the damage it might cause.

Society’s response to the threat must be disproportionate. It is this more than anything which defines a true “scare”; that, even where the threat is not wholly imaginary, the response to it is eventually seen to have been out of all proportion to its reality.

In Ionescu’s play *Rhinoceros*, written for the theater of the absurd, he explores the pressures on people to conform to trends and adopt expanding belief systems. As more and more people turn into rhinos, the pressure to conform by doing likewise becomes intense. Today, we witness just such a pressure on politicians, scientists, and the public to jump on the global-warming bandwagon. Even George W. Bush, who in his tenure as President of the United States had opposed every single effort to legislate even the most mild and moderate steps to improve or protect the environment, began to weaken on global warming in 2007. Former Vice-President Gore led a national campaign to raise consciousness about the dangers of global warming, based heavily on the *hockey stick* model. His efforts netted him the Nobel Peace Prize. The United Nations, through its Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), has similarly taken an alarmist position, also dependent on the *hockey stick*. The Union of Concerned Scientists, and a number of U.S. governmental agencies have taken similar positions. In addition, quite a large number of scientists have also become very concerned regarding the potential impacts of global warming.

Matt Ridley wrote an essay on the history of apocalyptic predictions.¹ He said:

“Best-selling economist Robert Heilbroner in 1974: ‘The outlook for man, I believe, is painful, difficult, perhaps desperate, and the hope that can be held out for his future prospects seem to be very slim indeed.’ Or best-selling ecologist Paul Ehrlich in 1968: ‘The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s [‘and 1980s’ was added in a later edition] the world will undergo famines-hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked on now . . . nothing can prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate.’ Or Jimmy Carter in a televised speech in 1977: ‘We could use up all of the proven reserves of oil in the entire world by the end of the next decade’.

“Predictions of global famine and the end of oil in the 1970s proved just as wrong as end-of-the-world forecasts from millennialist priests. Yet there is no sign that experts are becoming more cautious about apocalyptic promises. If anything, the rhetoric has ramped up in recent years. Echoing the Mayan