EDITORIAL REVIEW/ESSAY


Some years ago, Roger Revelle – who bears as much responsibility as anyone for kicking off the current rumpus about climate change – marvelled that worrying about climate was becoming “a cottage industry.” The present assortment of books consigned to my already cluttered desk by the merciless editor of *Climate Change* attests vividly to the health and diversity of that industry.

*Climate in Crisis* is a fast-paced, smoothly written, and slickly packaged polemic of the apocalyptic genre. In its first chapter, Bates calls for us to wake up before it is too late. The reasons why become evident in succeeding chapters. The “scientific proof” is in: Nineteen Eighty-Eight had surpassed the previous record-holder by 0.02°F! We must thus be in “The Greenhouse Century,” and Bates goes on to present a clear and workmanlike exposition of the received wisdom on greenhouse gases, their role in climate, and their contemporary changes. Subsequent chapters outline in concise and forceful form the principal environmental concerns of our time – deforestation, ozone depletion, loss of biodiversity, etc. The punch lines come in the concluding chapters, which call for “A New Agenda” and present “Twenty-one Better Ideas” for limiting environmental damage – a modest proposal for the restructuring of world society.

There is much to admire in Bates’ slim volume. It presents a remarkable range of material in notably compact, lucidly presented, and clearly illustrated form. However, it is clearly a tract, not a text. By concatenating an endless chain of worstcase scenarios, Bates leads us to see that environmental sin – and practically everything turns out to be sinful – leads to eternal damnation and can be averted only by abstinence and penance. I am, of course, being grievously unfair to a book that evidences immense labor and manifest good intentions. But the air of self-righteous certainty that envelops *Climate and Crisis* reminds me uncomfortably of fire, brimstone, and Jimmy Swaggert.

There’s little such certainty in S. Fred Singer’s *Global Climate Change*, a rather curious compendium of individually authored papers dealing with human influences on the global environment. Curt Covey provides a remarkably concise outline of the

---

1 The opinions expressed in this editorial are those of the reviewer, and do not reflect the views, conclusions, or recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences.
mechanisms of climate change and the broad history of planetary climate. Subsequent chapters by authors such as W. W. Kellogg, Ralph Cicerone, F.S. Rowland, Devendra Lal, and Singer himself deal in more detail with climate change induced by carbon dioxide and methane, ozone depletion, acid deposition, ocean pollution, desertification, nuclear winter, and the Gaia concept. For the most part, the expository papers seem technically sophisticated, balanced, and up-to-date. The curious aspect of the volume is the periodic insertion of dissenting views by irrepressible iconoclasts such as Hugh Ellsaesser, who "dare(s) to be right rather than merely to reflect the prevailing consensus." One can hardly quarrel with such divine inspiration, and regardless of the source, reminders of the inadequacies and uncertainties in current scientific understanding are always salutary. However, while all good scientists are skeptics, not all skepticism is good science. Equally curious is the insertion of a characteristically irreverent – and apparently posthumous – brief note by the late Helmut Landsberg without any explanation of its provenance or timeliness. Despite these idiosyncracies, there is enough of value in Singer’s compendium to make it a useful addition to one’s reference shelf, if kept in convenient proximity to the salt shaker.

A truly wondrous addition to one’s bedside table, however, is provided by Jonathan Weiner’s The Next Hundred Years. This compellingly readable travelogue through the embattled global environment is seductively readable and consistently on target. Weiner’s affectionately sketched account of Charles David Keeling’s life as the Boswell of carbon dioxide is alone worth the price of admission. Weiner traverses essentially the same ground as does Bates, and indeed Singer’s cohort – atmospheric changes, climate changes, ozone depletion, and so on. However, his lucid account – meticulously balanced, carefully documented, and entertainingly illuminated with anecdote and incident – steers comfortably clear of both Bates’s evangelistic apocalypse and Singer’s paralysis of uncertainty. Weiner offers no pat answers; however, he does convince us forcefully that mankind’s burgeoning influences on our small planet pose important questions for our species.

But what is the question? Is it, as Richard Darman recently proposed, “making the world safe for green vegetables.”2 Darman conjures up a cabal of “anti-growth activists” harboring a Utopian image of a “simple, bucolic, blue-green planet” and seeking to impose command-and-control global management. Bates certainly and Weiner less vociferously would no doubt be counted among their number. Actually, given the central position that they play in the nutrition of all living things – even Budget Directors – “making the world safe for green vegetables” is in fact rather a sound goal for environmental policy! Thus, although Mr. Darman’s statement of the question no doubt originated as platform hyperbole, it’s probably about as compact a statement of mankind’s overall responsibility for stewardship of the global environment as we are likely to devise. More significantly, however, his remarks also highlight vividly the central existential dilemma of our times – the conflict between mankind’s stewardship of

---