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American physicists warned not to debate global warming

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Bureaucrats at the American Physical Society (APS) have issued a curious warning to their members about an article in one of their own publications. Don't read this, they say - we don't agree with it. But what is it about the piece that is so terrible, that like Medusa, it could make men go blind?

It's an article that examines the calculation central to climate models. As the editor of the APS's newsletter *American Physics* Jeffrey Marque explains, the global warming debate must be re-opened.

"There is a considerable presence within the scientific community of people who do not agree with the IPCC conclusion that anthropogenic CO₂ emissions are very probably likely to be primarily responsible for the global warming that has occurred since the Industrial Revolution. Since the correctness or fallacy of that conclusion has immense implications for public policy and for the future of the biosphere, we thought it appropriate to present a debate within the pages of P&S concerning that conclusion," he [wrote](http://www.aps.org/units/fps/newsletters/200807/editor.cfm) (<http://www.aps.org/units/fps/newsletters/200807/editor.cfm>).

American Physics invited both believers and sceptics to submit articles, and has published a submission by Viscount Monckton [questioning](http://www.aps.org/units/fps/newsletters/200807/monckton.cfm) (<http://www.aps.org/units/fps/newsletters/200807/monckton.cfm>) the core calculation of the greenhouse gas theory: climate sensitivity. The believers are [represented](http://www.aps.org/units/fps/newsletters/200807/hafemeister.cfm) (<http://www.aps.org/units/fps/newsletters/200807/hafemeister.cfm>) by two physicists from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, who state that:

"Basic atmospheric models clearly predict that additional greenhouse gasses will raise the temperature of Earth. To argue otherwise, one must prove a physical mechanism that gives a reasonable alternative cause of warming. This has not been done. Sunspot and temperature correlations do not prove causality."

But within a few days, Monckton's piece carried a health warning: in bright red ink.

The following article has not undergone any scientific peer review. Its conclusions are in disagreement with the overwhelming opinion of the world scientific community. The Council of the American Physical Society disagrees with this article's conclusions.

Not so much Medusa, then, as Nanny telling the children what not to think.

"The first sentence is nothing more or less than a deliberate lie," [writes](http://numberwatch.co.uk/2008%20July.htm) (<http://numberwatch.co.uk/2008%20July.htm>) Professor John Brignell on his Numberwatch blog. "The second is, to say the least, contentious; while the third is an outrageous

example of *ultra vires* interference by a committee in the proper conduct of scientific debate."

Monckton has asked for an apology. In a letter to the APS President Arthur Bienenstock, he writes:

"If the Council has not scientifically evaluated or formally considered my paper, may I ask with what credible scientific justification, and on whose authority, the offending text asserts primo, that the paper had not been scientifically reviewed when it had; secundo, that its conclusions disagree with what is said (on no evidence) to be the "overwhelming opinion of the world scientific community"; and, tertio, that "The Council of the American Physical Society disagrees with this article's conclusions"? Which of my conclusions does the Council disagree with, and on what scientific grounds (if any)?"

Believers and sceptics have spent the past few days examining the value of "peer review", and the weight of validity that should be placed on "publication". Monckton is a classics scholar and former journalist, which believers maintain is enough to disqualify him from holding an opinion.

(Whether it's science is not in question - whether it's "good science" or "bad science" is the question. An earlier presentation by Monckton examining questioning climate sensitivity received [was examined](http://www.realclimate.org/index.php/archives/2006/11/cuckoo-science/) (http://www.realclimate.org/index.php/archives/2006/11/cuckoo-science/) by NASA's Gavin Schmidt on the believers' blog, RealClimate.org.)

But for anyone without a dog in this race, and perhaps not familiar with the "state of the science" there may be a couple of surprises in Monckton's paper.

One is how small the field of "experts" really is. The UN's IPCC is tasked with producing a summary of the "scientific consensus" and claims to process the contributions of some 2,500 scientists. But as Monckton writes:

"It is of no little significance that the IPCC's value for the coefficient in the CO₂ forcing equation depends on only **one paper in the literature**; that its values for the feedbacks that it believes account for two-thirds of humankind's effect on global temperatures are likewise taken from **only one paper**; and that its implicit value of the crucial parameter κ depends upon only two papers, **one of which had been written by a lead author of the chapter in question**, and neither of which provides any theoretical or empirical justification for a value as high as that which the IPCC adopted." [our emphasis]

Another eye-opener is his explanation of how the believers' climate models are verified:

"Since we cannot measure any individual forcing directly in the atmosphere, the models draw upon results of laboratory experiments in passing sunlight through chambers in which atmospheric constituents are artificially varied," writes Monckton. "Such experiments are, however, of limited value when translated into the real atmosphere, where radiative transfers and non-radiative transports (convection and evaporation up, advection along, subsidence and precipitation down), as well as altitudinal and latitudinal asymmetries, greatly complicate the picture."

In other words, an unproven hypothesis is fed into a computer (so far so good), but it can only be verified against experiments that have no resemblance to the chaotic system of the Earth's climate. It is not hard to see how the scientists could produce an immaculate "model" that's theoretically perfect in every respect (all the equations balance, and it may even be programmed to offer perfect "hind-casting"), but which has no practical

predictive value at all. It's safe from the rude intrusion of empirical evidence drawn from atmospheric observation.

The great British-born physicist Freeman Dyson offered an impertinent dose of reality which illustrates the dangers of relying on theory for both your hypothesis and the evidence you need to support it. Since 8 per cent of atmospheric CO₂ is absorbed by the planet's biomass every year, [notes Dyson](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21494) (http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21494), the average lifespan of a carbon molecule in the atmosphere is about 12 years. His observation leaves the "climate scientists" models as immaculate as they were before, but suggests a very different course of policy action. It suggests our stewardship of land should be at the forefront of CO₂ mitigation strategies. That's not something we hear from politicians, pressure groups and, yes ... climate scientists.

Comments [welcome](mailto:andrew.orlowski@theregister.co.uk?Subject=aps_monckton) (mailto:andrew.orlowski@theregister.co.uk?Subject=aps_monckton). ®

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