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We ignore scientists at our peril

By David Suzuki
It's happening again. Research confirms agreement among most climate scientists that we are altering the Earth's climate, mainly by burning fossil fuels. And industrial interests, backed by climate change deniers, pull out every trick to sow doubt and confusion. What will it take for us to start seriously tackling the problem?

For the latest study, investigators led by John Cook at Skeptical Science examined abstracts of 12,000 peer-reviewed papers on climate science. They also received comments from 1,200 scientists, who rated more than 2,100 full studies. In both cases, more than 97 per cent of studies that took a position on the causes of global warming said human activity is a primary factor. Less than one per cent rejected the consensus position. The results are consistent with previous research.

As expected, deniers are out in full force, many employing methods common to those who reject science. Medical scientists Pascal Diethelm and Martin McKee examined these tactics in the European Journal of Public Health: cherry picking, reference to fake experts, misrepresentation and logical fallacies, impossible expectations of what research can deliver and conspiracy theories. Deniers often rely on talking points spread by a handful of usual suspects, including Christopher Monckton in the U.K., the Heartland Institute and Anthony Watts in the U.S. and Friends of Science and Tom Harris in Canada.

The Alberta-based group was caught several years ago funneling money – most from fossil fuel companies – through a “Science Education Fund” at the University of Calgary. It was used to create a disinformation campaign and video with Harris, who then worked with PR firm APCO Worldwide and now heads up an organization called (ironically) the International Climate Science Coalition, which rejects the scientific consensus on human-caused climate change. According to Desmog Blog, Friends of Science has misrepresented the recent survey, calling it “careless incitement of a misinformed and frightened public, when in fact the sun is the main driver of climate change; not human activity or carbon dioxide.”

Another recent misrepresentation concerns research by the U.K. Met Office, which deniers falsely claim shows the Earth hasn't warmed for 17 years.

Science isn't perfect, but it's one of the best tools we have for understanding our place in the cosmos. When people around the world apply rigorous scientific method to study our actions and their impacts on the things that keep us alive and healthy – clean air, water, soil and biodiverse plants and animals – we must listen, not just about climate, but about a range of issues.

Many scientists are saying we're creating serious problems – but we have solutions. A recent statement, “Scientists' Consensus on Maintaining Humanity's Life Support Systems in the 21st Century”, lists five major challenges: climate disruption, extinctions, loss of ecosystem diversity, pollution, and human population growth and resource consumption.

More than 2,200 have signed, stating, “As scientists who study the interaction of people with the rest of the biosphere using a wide range of approaches, we agree that the evi-

dence that humans are damaging their ecological life-support systems is overwhelming.”

Some may claim this is “alarmist”. It is – because the situation is alarming. It goes on: “For humanity's continued health and prosperity, we all – individuals, businesses, political leaders, religious leaders, scientists, and people in every walk of life – must work hard to solve these five global problems starting today.”

Many of the proposed solutions have long been advocated by people working in science, the environment and even business: conserving energy and reducing fossil fuel use; better ecosystem management through processes like natural capital evaluation; improved food production and distribution and waste reduction; regulating and preventing pollution; and stabilizing population growth through better education, health care, family-planning services, economic opportunities and women's rights.

Humanity has changed direction before. When our tools become outdated, we invent new ones. It's why in many countries, we no longer rely on slavery to maintain economies, we can all vote regardless of race or sex and we enjoy longer and healthier lives than before. Many systems we've invented don't apply to current circumstances. We can and must change the way we act. That requires listening to scientists and those who are working on solutions, and not to the naysayers and deniers who would keep us stalled in a doomed spiral.

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