

The Merits of Separating Global Warming from Extension Education Sustainability Programs

Abstract

Using the rhetoric of global warming to support the adoption of sustainable practices beneficial to society limits their adoption. Climate data are about to fall outside the models used to "settle" the global warming issue. Atmospheric carbon dioxide continues to increase, while temperature, since 1998, has decreased. The science is becoming unsettling. Is it time for Extension educators to reevaluate sustainability programming and de-emphasize climate and concentrate instead on the many other beneficial aspects of moving toward a more sustainable future at all levels of Extension programming—agriculture, natural resources, the environment, health, nutrition, and housing?

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Introduction

Extension educators have embraced global warming and climate change programs over the last 20 years (Miller, 1990; Fraisse, Breuer, Zierden, & Ingram, 2009; Mazze & Stockard, 2013) and have incorporated those topics into sustainable living educational programs (Elliot et al., 2008). However, average global temperatures have declined for the last 15 years compared to the El Niño peak of 1998 (NASA, 2013), while carbon dioxide emissions continue their steady rise (NOAA, 2013). Global warming terms used in sustainable living education programs now raise more questions than answers. It's not the same as presenting data from a replicated crop variety trial with statistically significant winners and losers. Instead, we are discussing projections, models, predictions, and attempting to attach winners and losers to it. None of the current climate models predicted temperature would stop rising (Plimer, 2009).

Re-Thinking Climate Change

- Historically, today's climate is within natural variations and is nothing to fear.
- Climate is always changing, and civilizations thrive and expand during warm periods.

Increasing 20th century CO₂ levels contributed to the Green Revolution's higher plant yields and will be a factor in feeding a rising world population.

- The large diurnal surface temperature variations between daytime highs and nighttime lows leave one to seek the simplest explanation—the sun drives climate.
- We are entering a cycle of reduced sun spot activity that may account for the halt in temperature rise and would mean cooler, not warmer temperatures ahead.
- How many years must the planet cool before we can say it is not warming?

The Debate or the Facts

We can debate the positives and negatives of global warming, the difficulties and merits of using computer models for data collection. We can debate the many variables associated with climate science—the atmosphere, clouds, oceanography, the sun—and whether these and their relative weights are included correctly in the climate models used to set policy. But it would be a debate, not a presentation of hard facts backed up by replicated data collection through observation and measurement, based on the scientific method. The latter I can confidently present to my clientele groups and stakeholders. And they can confidently accept. The debate leaves us both confused.

UF/IFAS Extension Orange County is in its sixth year of sustainable living Extension education programs. Significant results for adopting sustainable practices have occurred without emphasizing climate as a motivating factor (Tyson et al., 2012). Because, frankly, it is easier to present just the facts. We can present the environmental and social benefits of reducing water, fertilizer, and pesticide use. We can save energy and healthcare costs by promoting healthy lifestyle changes. We can encourage support for local food production thus improving food security and healthy local—by just presenting the facts, please, just the facts!

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