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Climate Change: A Disinformation Campaign

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Climate Change: A Disinformation Campaign

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The January/February 2011 issue of *Environment* was upbeat with its presentation of collaborative place-based environmental work being done on the Mexican-American border of the Sonoran desert (Laird-Benner and Ingram), the sorts of advances that would be possible with partnerships between institutions of higher education and their neighborhoods through Urban Sustainability Extension Services (USES) (Molnar et al.), and a policy option proposed for reducing carbon emissions and inspiring people through personal carbon trading (PCT) (Parag and Strickland). These are all good, energizing examples that Alan H. McGowan (January/February 2011) rightly celebrates in his accompanying editorial "Building on the Good News." Constructive ideas like these are wonderful to read for those of us who have been in the "trenches" of environmental education for a long while, and a great resource to direct our students to when they ask what they can do to move our society toward sustainability. However, there ought to be a comment on the beginning of Alan McGowan's editorial where he says:

"The data indicate that although roughly half of the American population feels that climate change is real; the other half feels either that it is not happening or that it is not very important. And, although the following piece of news is not surprising given other data from the National Science Board indicating that few Americans feel comfortable about their knowledge of science, a scant eight percent of Americans feel that they have more than a superficial knowledge of the issue."

In fact, public confusion about climate change is not the same thing as the generally low confidence about their scientific literacy that Americans express in polls. The low percentage of Americans who feel they really understand climate change science is the product of a long-term, well-funded, and well-documented corporate disinformation campaign. It is crucial that we acknowledge and confront this truth if the situation is ever going to improve enough for the peculiar public policy paralysis on this issue in the United States to be overcome.

At the outset of a discussion of the culpability of some businesses, it is important to recognize that relatively few corporations have been actively involved in this disinformation campaign; among the greatest resources we have as a society to overcome the climatic challenges that face us are the energy, insight, and power of businesses increasingly dedicated to working for a sustainable future. The move toward increasing corporate social responsibility is a hopeful sign of our new century. It is a pity that a relatively few really bad apples have given the corporate sector of the world a bad odor to many environmentalists. The serious efforts toward sustainability that have been initiated by firms like Nike, Interface, Electrolux, Ikea, Dell,

Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Johnson & Johnson, Intel, Sony, GlaxoSmithKline, Wal-Mart, and many others ought to be celebrated loudly to make it clear that the business world has and must have an important role in developing a sustainable future.

Also at the outset, it is important to note that there is no longer any real debate among qualified scientists about the reality of human-caused climate change. The mainstream of scientific opinion, the conclusions of 97 percent of climate scientists, and the opinions of virtually all of the most qualified climate scientists concur: Climate change is real and we are causing it. Analyses of the strength of this consensus have been published, and I do not need to rehearse all the information here.¹ Those things being said, some corporations have used what might be called the “dark side of the freedom of speech” by generously funding disinformation campaigns in the United States that seek to spread uncertainty, slow climate change legislation, and confuse the public. The reason that many people have erroneous views about climate change, or are deeply confused about the issue, is not that they are unintelligent or bad at science; it is that they have been intentionally and skillfully misled. The denial campaigns have been painstakingly documented by a number of sources, initially in a report available beginning in 2007 at the website of the Union of Concerned Scientists entitled *Smoke, Mirrors, and Hot Air*,² and more recently in two thoroughly documented books, *Climate Cover Up, The Crusade to Deny Global Warming* by James Hoggan and Richard Littlemore (Greystone Books, 2009), and *Merchants of Doubt* by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway (Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

The entire story of the climate change disinformation campaign is far too long to tell in this commentary; suffice it to say that the original genius (if that is a good word to use) for this sort of disinformation campaign came about during the end game of the tobacco industry’s attempt to prevent the public from understanding that cigarette smoke is hazardous to your health. The tobacco industry and its public relations firms invented a process later adopted whole-cloth by ExxonMobil, described by the Union of Concerned Scientists as having:

- Manufactured uncertainty by raising doubts about even the most indisputable scientific evidence.
- Adopted a strategy of information laundering by using seemingly independent front organizations to publicly further its desired message and thereby confuse the public.
- Promoted scientific spokespeople who misrepresent peer-reviewed scientific findings or cherry-pick facts.
- Attempted to shift the focus away from meaningful action on global warming with misleading charges about the need for “sound science.”³

Consultation with the report or either of the two books just listed will provide you with abundant details of how this worked. An important point to notice is that this was not an open exchange of divergent views; false front organizations and false grass-roots participation were used to disguise the origin of the disinformation. Much of the original thought behind this approach was made public from papers released as part of the massive tobacco lawsuit, which the industry lost and which cost it many millions of dollars. The Union of Concerned Scientists’ report summarizes the tobacco industry’s program well in the following brief quote⁴:

“In reviewing the tobacco industry’s disinformation campaign, the first thing to note is that the tobacco companies quickly realized they did not need to prove their products were safe. Rather, as internal documents have long since revealed, they had only to “maintain doubt” on the scientific front as a calculated strategy. As one famous internal memo from the Brown & Williamson tobacco company put it: “Doubt is our product, since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the minds of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy.” “

It would doubtless have been more difficult to research the climate change disinformation campaign had Exxon-Mobil not actually hired a number of former tobacco disinformation campaign staff people to re-implement this strategy, in the same roles they played in the earlier campaign. A level of hubris was certainly involved in this hiring decision. The Advancement of Sound Science Coalition (TASCC) run by Steve Milloy and funded by the tobacco industry to create confusion about the health effects of their products transformed ever so slightly into The Advancement of Sound Science Center (TASCC) run by Steve Milloy and funded by Exxon-Mobil to create confusion about the reality of human-caused climate change.⁵ Perhaps the project saved some small amount of money on letterhead by retaining the initials TASCC. Milloy⁶ was not left bereft of his former tobacco-industry-funded colleagues⁷ in the climate change denial effort. Notable deniers who took part in both the tobacco health effects disinformation campaign and the climate change disinformation campaign included, among others, Frederick Seitz and S. Fred Singer (the latter also continues to deny the scientific evidence that secondhand tobacco smoke has been demonstrated to have health hazards,⁸ and has taken a turn at denying that atmospheric chlorofluorocarbons [CFCs] cause stratospheric ozone depletion⁹).

There have been other entities involved in funding or organizing climate change disinformation, and this commentary has insufficient space to list the other corporate and institutional players from the petroleum and coal industries that have been involved. Readers of Environment may find perusal of the sources footnoted in this commentary interesting. ExxonMobil was the most generous funder of such efforts, but not the only one. Unlike the tobacco disinformation campaign, which crossed the line legally as well as ethically, the climate change disinformation campaign is (at least to my knowledge) legal, and I will leave it to the reader to decide on whether it is ethical. The efforts made to establish false front organizations suggest that ExxonMobil, at least, was not anxious to have its name publicly associated with the denial effort. I also leave readers to ponder the relationship between conservative think tanks and the corporate component of the climate change denial effort; the ideological end of this relationship has been examined elsewhere.¹⁰ But it is worth asking: How vast an undertaking has the corporate climate change disinformation campaign effort been, and how much hidden financial support was involved?

The total amount of money expended by industry on climate change denial can only be estimated, but the Union of Concerned Scientists report provides a breakdown of where and how ExxonMobil spent roughly \$16,000,000 between 1998 and 2005 on the people and organizations of the climate change denial effort; the list of recipients is three pages long.¹¹ The

climate change denial activities finally became so egregious that the scientific community stepped out of its normal role and took a rare public stance. In 2006, the Royal Society, the oldest and one of the most prestigious scientific bodies in the world, sent a letter to ExxonMobil decrying its activities and calling upon it to stop funding climate change disinformation efforts, and at that time ExxonMobil appeared to be ceasing such activities.¹² However, since that time funding of such efforts has continued. On 1 July 2009, The Guardian reported:

“The world’s largest oil company is continuing to fund lobby groups that question the reality of global warming, despite a public pledge to cut support for such climate change denial, a new analysis shows. Company records show that ExxonMobil handed over hundreds of thousands of pounds to such lobby groups in 2008. These include the National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA) in Dallas, Texas, which received \$75,000 (£45,500), and the Heritage Foundation in Washington DC, which received \$50,000.”¹³

Does this all matter to readers of Environment? I believe it matters a great deal. The ongoing impacts on the U.S. public of the climate change disinformation campaign reverberate in how every article being published on climate change in Environment today is written or received. Discussions with friends and colleagues that ought to be about “how” and “what if” turn out instead to be about “whether or not.” The article by Dunlea et al. (March/April 2011) feels it necessary to begin, “There is no doubt that climate change is a hot topic in the news. Coverage of the issue from all sides of the debate has presented a lot of conflicting information that, unfortunately, has left many people confused about what is really known about climate change.” They then go on to provide convincing evidence for something they should not have to be supporting at this stage in our understanding. Other articles like that by Nkem et al. (March/April, 2011) take climate change impacts in Africa as a given, but will be read with skepticism by people who have been intentionally misled on this crucial issue. Stafford et al. (January/February 2010) stress how little time there is to act if we are to avoid encountering an environmental tipping point with dramatic consequences, and the climate change disinformation campaign is one reason we have wasted so much precious time and achieved so little societal consensus and action. Corner and Pidgeon in their article on geoengineering (January/February 2010) note the lack of effective action promoted by the climate change disinformation campaign by writing, “Unfortunately, the increasing attention paid to mitigating dangerous climate change has not prevented a continuing rise in global greenhouse gas emissions.”

Contextualizing what we read today in Environment on this topic requires a realization of the scope, pervasive effects, and ongoing impact of the climate change disinformation campaign. Alan McGowan was right to celebrate the positive and hopeful articles in his fine editorial. But Americans are not confused about climate change for an incomprehensible reason or because of poor scientific education, and a painful honesty is called for. We need to know the story of how our society ended up beginning to take positive steps so late in the process of climate change, and we need to insist on a new honesty from those who prevented earlier and perhaps simpler steps from being taken.

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NOTES

1. W. R. L. Anderegg, J. W. Prall, J. Harold, and S. H. Schneider, "Expert Credibility in Climate Change," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA*, 107(2010): 12107–9; N. Oreskes, "Beyond the Ivory Tower: The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change," *Science* 306 (2004): 1686.
2. Union of Concerned Scientists, *Smoke, Mirrors, and Hot Air*, 2007, http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/science_and_impacts/global_warming_contrarians/exxonmobil-report-smoke.html
3. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
5. N. Oreskes and E. M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 150, 247.
6. Steve Milloy is presently a "junk science commentator" for Fox News and runs a website junkscience.com, and he remains critical of the scientific validity of evolution, the health dangers of mercury exposure, the American Lung Association, and the banning of DDT, as well as climate change science.
7. According to a recent article, up to at least 2005 Steve Milloy continued to be paid by the tobacco industry; see article by G. Monbiot, "The Denial Industry," *The Guardian*, (19 September 2006), available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2006/sep/19/ethicalliving.g2>
8. N. Oreskes and E. M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 150, 247; also see the editorial by S. F. Singer on the website for his present organization, Science and Environmental Policy Project (16 October, 2010), "Second Hand Smoke (SHS) and Lung Cancer," available at <http://www.sepp.org/science-editorials.cfm?whichcat=Health%20Issues&whichsubcat=Second%20Hand%20Smoke>; and see also http://www.heartland.org/article/29083/Secondhand_Smoke_Lung_Cancer_and_the_Global_Warming_Debate_.html
9. See two articles by S. F. Singer: "(N)O₃ Problem," *The National Interest*, (Summer 1994): 73–76; "The Ozone-CFC Debacle: Hasty Action, Shaky Science," *Technology: Journal of The Franklin Institute*, 332A (1995): 61–66.
10. P. J. Jacques, R. E. Dunlap, and M. Freeman, "The Organisation of Denial: Conservative Think Tanks And Environmental Skepticism," *Environmental Politics*, 17(2008): 349–385
11. Union of Concerned Scientists, *Smoke, Mirrors, and Hot Air* (2007), 31–33. http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/science_and_impacts/global_warming_contrarians/exxonmobil-report-smoke.html

12. An article that begins with a link to the complete letter from the Royal Society is available online at

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2006/sep/20/oilandpetrol.business>

13. D. Adam, "ExxonMobil Continuing to Fund Climate Skeptic Groups, Records Show," The Guardian, 1 July 2009, available at [http://](http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/jul/01/exxon-mobil-climate-change-sceptics-funding)

www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/jul/01/exxon-mobil-climate-change-sceptics-funding