

Climate Change's Rational Optimist Matt Ridley
by JULIE KELLY September 28, 2017

The irrational pessimists leading the international climate-change crusade consider Ridley a heretic.

He calls himself a “lukewarmer” on climate change.

The author of several scientific books — including *The Rational Optimist*, his paean about how human grit and ingenuity have historically prevailed over a harsh natural world — Ridley acknowledges that the greenhouse-gas effect is real and humans have caused most of the warming over the past 50 years: “I just don’t think it will ever get dangerous, and if it does, by that time, we will have had plenty of time to adapt to it with new technologies,” he told me from his home in northern England. While most reasonable people would agree with his logical and hopeful approach to potential global catastrophe, the irrational pessimists leading the international climate-change crusade consider it heresy.

Many have smeared Viscount Ridley, who is also a Conservative-party member of the House of Lords, as a climate “denier” and targeted him for professional destruction. “I’ve written about many controversial issues during my career,” Ridley said. “Never, have I ever experienced anything like what happens when you write about climate, which is a systematic and organized attempt to blacken your name rather than your arguments, and to try to pressure any outlet that publishes me into not publishing me any more.” A group of activists and scientists is urging the Times (U.K.) to stop publishing a regular column authored by Ridley because his views often challenge the climate tribe’s reigning dogma.

Fortunately, none of this seems to have dampened Ridley's good humor or self-effacing manner. Quite to the contrary: This rational optimist is now talking about the benefits of rising carbon dioxide emissions. In a speech last year at the Royal Society of London, Ridley presented the evidence on global greening, which is the spread of green vegetation around the world over the past 30 years. It is called the "CO₂ fertilization effect" and is caused by elevated carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere.

Ridley cited a 2016 study authored by scientists from China, the U.S., Britain, and several other countries that showed a 14 percent increase in green vegetation between 1982 to 2011; 70 percent of that lush growth is attributed to higher concentrations of CO₂. Zaichun Zhu, one of the study's co-authors explained that "the greening over the past 33 years reported in this study is equivalent to adding a green continent about two times the size of mainland USA and has the ability to fundamentally change the cycling of water and carbon in the climate system." We have more croplands, grasslands, and forests now than we did in the 1980s. "Frankly, I think this is big news," Ridley told the audience. "A new continent's worth of green vegetation in a single human generation." Ridley also presented a study published in *Nature Climate Change* in April 2016 that showed how rising CO₂ levels could enhance photosynthesis and reduce water use:

We find CO₂ effects increase global crop water productivity by the 2080s depending on crop types, with particularly large increases in arid regions. If realized in the fields, the effects of elevated [CO₂] could considerably mitigate global yield losses whilst reducing agricultural consumptive water use (4–17%). We identify regional disparities driven by differences in growing conditions across agro-ecosystems that could have implications for increasing food production without compromising water security.

(Great news, right? Good luck finding it in the New York Times.)

“This is a huge global phenomenon, which is bringing enormous financial benefits to agriculture,” Ridley told me. “That means we have a genuine benefit to carbon dioxide that surely must be taken into account if you are calculating the social cost of carbon. Given that we are not seeing any clear impact on droughts, floods, or storms, it is very hard to argue that there have been net negatives to carbon from climate change so far. In fact, there have clearly been net benefits.” Grain production worldwide hit an all-time high in 2016, with global cereal production 5.5 million tons higher than the peak year of 2014, according to the United Nations.

It seems like Ridley’s timing couldn’t be better for him and worse for the carbon-is-poison crowd. Last week, the scientific establishment had a bench-clearing brawl over a new climate study that suggests we have a much bigger “carbon budget” to burn before we reach the danger zone in global temperatures. Several climatologists authored a paper published in Nature Geosciences indicating that, despite the desperate warnings from the climate tribe that it’s too late to save the planet, we can continue to emit carbon at current levels for the next few decades and still remain within the Paris Climate Accord range of a 1.5°C increase in global temperatures from the late 1880s to 2100. The reason? Climate models projected that rising CO₂ levels would result in warming about 0.3°C higher than it actually is. In other words, CO₂ did not have the heat-inducing effect that climate scientists warned it would. Richard Millar, one of the paper’s co-authors, said at the website Carbon Brief that the models’ projections “don’t match exactly with how much warming we’ve seen — they display slightly more

warming for slightly less cumulative CO₂ than we've seen in the real world.”

Ridley told me he welcomes the climb-down:

This is a long overdue public concession by mainstream climate scientists — though the IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] has also admitted it in somewhat obscure language two years ago — that the models they rely upon have been running too hot, predicting too much warming. They now admit that the 2°C threshold, which is when climate change is expected to do net harm, will not be reached at this rate for 80 years, roughly the end of the century. I would be amazed if the much richer people of the later 21st century have not cracked fusion or some other efficient source of low-carbon energy by then.

Climate scientists, environmentalists, and politicians here and abroad could use a healthy dose of that kind of rational optimism. Instead, they will no doubt continue their scare tactics, push their unattainable and punitive zero-emissions goal, and bully any “denier” who doesn't capitulate to their political agenda. Too bad we don't have more Matt Ridleys on this side of the Atlantic.

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