



Enterprises in Energy: My Adventures in the World of Energy & Utilities

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2008

Inadvertent Weather Modification

Wesleyan's science library generally includes good coverage for the 1960s, 70s and 80s. However, to the chagrin of many students here, it tends to drop off after that point - apparently already resigned to internet supremacy. Anyways, I am writing a thesis on general circulation models used in climate research, and a few days ago I stumbled into a bunch of books entitled "weather modification" - dusty and unloved in the sci li stacks.

One of the interesting things about the so-called global warming debate in this country is that the discussion takes place as a single debate that progresses over well-worn tracks, instead of as a series of different debates over the huge issue of human interference in the climate.

For my thesis, I am devoting a small amount of space to historically contextualizing the current climate debate. Actually, before I started, I was under the impression that this debate had begun in the 1980s. In fact, the history of our awareness of climate change is long and heterogeneous (For example, Thomas Jefferson had some opinions on the subject).

There is no time to go into whole history (plus, I am not sure if you guys would find it as interesting as I do) - but I thought that I would blog a bit about weather modification - a topic of much interest in the 1950s-early 70s.

When people first began to develop more sophisticated numerical weather prediction models in the 1950s, one of the primary applications they had in mind was controlling the weather. This was during the Cold War, when worries over Soviet expansion ran high. In fact, the Soviets were running cloud seeding experiments (using silver iodide to coax cloud formation). They were also interested in opening the Bering Strait by somehow melting the ice and diverting rivers into Russian wheat fields (Schneider, Nature, Jan 2001).

The debate during the Cold War was over when our climate models would allow scientists to run experiments predicting the reaction of the climate system to certain well-planned interventions. Idealists from the period envisioned more rain and fewer storms.



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"To counteract global warming, John Latham of the National Center for Atmospheric Research has proposed a system of enormous eggbeater-like turbines that would stir up seawater, thickening the cloud cover to reflect more of the sun's energy back into space. (Photo / Stephen Salter)." Picture and credit from The Boston Globe article, "Don't Like the Weather, Change It" which can be found at:

http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2005/07/03/dont_like_the_weather_change_it/

Anyways, as you can see from the above picture. The science of weather modification continues - and members of this small field tend to refer to climate change as "inadvertent weather modification." There are actually numerous schemes found on the fringes of modern day climate science which creatively attempt to solve parts of global warming with geo-engineering projects. For example, these scientists argue that increasing the net reflectance (albedo) properties of the earth might help stave off temperature rise.

Posted by Emily at 5:31 PM

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