

UN Climate Change Report: A Choice between 'Mad Max and Hunger Games'

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) this week released a special report detailing all the ways climate change is predicted to wreak havoc on humans.

[The report](#) is about 800 pages long, so I'll offer a summary to save you some time:

- Global temperatures today are 1.0°C above pre-industrial temperatures.
- We're seeing an increase in extreme weather and other negative consequences as a result of the increase, including receding sea ice in the Arctic and rising global sea levels.
- A 1.5°C increase will be (much) worse than a 1.0 increase; 2°C would be much worse than that.
- We're currently on track to exceed 3°C.
- Only broad and drastic changes in the world economy can prevent global calamity.

The report's glum findings were announced at a press conference by a United Nations panel in Incheon, South Korea. Panelists tried to sound optimistic, but there was no sugar-coating the report's key finding.

"If you would like to stabilize global warming to 1.5°C, the key message is that net CO₂ emissions at the global scale must reach zero by 2050," said panelist Valerie Masson-Delmotte, a French climate scientist and research director at the French Alternative Energies and Atomic Energy Commission. "That's the most important finding of the report."

The report made it clear that fossils fuel—oil, gas, and

coal—which the world heavily depends on, must be phased out to achieve this goal: especially coal.

“Coal will have to be reduced very, very substantially by the middle of the century,” said Jim Skea, a Scottish academic and IPCC panelist. “Coal has the highest carbon content of all the fossil fuels.”

Barring these substantial reductions, we’re told, millions will die. Literally.

One hates to describe the UN’s latest effort as a “scare report,” but consider the reactions it precipitated. One *New York Times* climate reporter [put it](#) this way:

I’m listening to the UN’s climate change panel and they’re basically saying, it would take a herculean effort to stop us from hitting 1.5C. Based on their description the difference between 1.5C and 2C is basically the difference between the Hunger Games and Mad Max.

A college professor who worked on the report said it brought her to tears.

“I am overwhelmed by the challenge we face,” University of Arizona Professor Diana Liver [told Grist](#). “I had a good cry on the plane home from exhaustion and thinking about implications of the report.”

I cite these example not to mock people who appear genuinely concerned about climate change, but to demonstrate a point: these findings are *supposed* to scare us.

The Use of Fear

Fear, of course, is perhaps the greatest motivator in the world. And in this case, fear is entirely rational if one accepts the premise that the world will face a climate

apocalypse if net CO2 emissions are not brought to zero. Because that's almost certainly not going to happen.

Fortunately, scientists generally and environmentalists specifically have [a rather poor track record](#) when it comes to dire predictions. Yet government's ability to use perceived threats to expand power [is more impressive](#) (and more dangerous).

And unsurprisingly, some are already citing the report's conclusions as evidence that the governments of the world must drastically ramp up regulation of the free market to save us.

"The world's top scientists just gave rigorous backing to systematically dismantle capitalism as a key requirement to maintaining civilization and a habitable planet," tweeted meteorologist Eric Holthaus, who covered the press conference for *Grist*.

To some extent, this statement is hyperbole on the part of Holthaus, [a passionate advocate](#) in the fight against climate change. No "rigorous" case for dismantling capitalism was made during panel discussions, to my knowledge. (I watched all 90 minutes of the less-than-riveting conference, although I confess I may have nodded off near the end.)

Either way, Holthaus is not wrong that panelists made it clear that state action was the primary, if not sole, mechanism to address the looming catastrophe. With the possible exception of South Korean economist Hoesung Lee, the current IPCC chair, there was little focus on how human innovation and technology might be utilized in the effort.

The Means, Not the End

This has long been my problem with the science of climate change: it has always felt a bit like a means to an end. A burning problem so vast, requiring such sweeping collective

action, that nothing but the broadest central planning could address it. Humanity, we're essentially told, is doomed lest people concede their freedom to the experts, lawmakers, and bureaucrats who can save us.

Is there reason to be skeptical? Of course. The wise words of the British historian Paul Johnson, recently highlighted in [an article by FEE's Lawrence Reed](#), help us understand why.

Johnson observed that many of the horrors of the 20th century stemmed from the ideas of intellectuals, experts, and utopianists eager to "correct" supposed imbalances in our world. Here is what he wrote:

One of the principal lessons of our tragic century, which has seen so many millions of innocent lives sacrificed in schemes to improve the lot of humanity, is—beware intellectuals. Not merely should they be kept away from the levers of power, they should also be objects of particular suspicion when they seek to offer collective advice.

That's sound advice.

And if the "solution to climate change" requires ceding individual and corporate autonomy to the state, well, that's no solution at all. That's a road to serfdom. And unlike *Mad Max* and *The Hunger Games*, history shows there's nothing fictional about it.

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