

Editorial: Hot Air on the Web

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At the time this is written, it appears that the United States Senate will not ratify the Kyoto climate treaty, and several of the European Union countries are expressing their serious reservations despite having signed. Although criticized by environmentalists for compromise, the treaty has been viewed by industry and commerce as akin to the Central Park-sized asteroid, scheduled to devastate Earth in movie theaters this summer. While previous global climate treaties dealt with aerosol propellants and refrigerants, for which substitutes were almost immediately found, the Kyoto treaty attempts to restrain the powerful and wealthy industries at the heart of modern economies and lifestyles: fossil fuels and transportation. Even though the treaty stands almost no chance of becoming law, the affected industries are leaving nothing to chance.

As reported by the New York Times (April 26, 1998), industry groups, headed by the American Petroleum Institute, have planned to spend up to five million dollars to call into question the scientific consensus that human activities are contributing to global warming. One of the opening shots in the battle was featured in an article entitled [Global Warming: Enjoy It while You Can](#), authored by John Carlisle, that propounded the view that the warming of the earth in the twentieth century was a natural phenomenon, merely the continued waning of the previous ice age. It further said that the climate had fluctuated naturally from one extreme to another, and would continue to do so, and that environmentalists opposed to economic progress concocted the greenhouse gas scare. A footnote identified the author as being affiliated with the National Center for Public Policy Research, Washington, D.C.

A search for the group's Web site www.nationalcenter.inter.net revealed a site that had something to say about almost everything; every proposition put forth by liberals, environmentalists, political or legal reformers was met by its mirror, conservative, and contradictory image. Links to related sites, took one to such fascinating places as The Greening Earth Society www.greeningearthsociety.org "carbon dioxide helps plants grow: let's produce more!" and the [Junk Science Home Page](#) in News Archives May 1-15,1998 "smoking isn't a public health issue!"

Trying to find out more about these organizations took me to the Clearinghouse on Environmental Advocacy and Research, who had two revealing articles that cataloged the groups and their corporate benefactors: [Wise Use of the Web: The Anti-Environmental Lobby and the Internet](#) and [Industry Deploys New Anti-Environmental Strategy](#). They list dozens of additional sites active in the anti-environmental movement. Few, if any, of these sites identify their corporate sponsors or the qualifications of their authors.

One of the virtues cited for the World Wide Web is that unlike conventional media the low cost of entry removes the barriers to publishing, so that "anyone can have his voice heard." Clearly, however, money still talks louder, and sheer volume can overwhelm less well-funded viewpoints, whatever the scientific consensus. Because most modern media are based on advertising, they have a vested interest in having their readers take everything presented at face value. Librarians, educators, and information scientists need to encourage a habit of critical reading and evaluation of sources, particularly when using electronic resources whose provenance is unknown.

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