From the sidelines

Memo 14/08

Humanitarian concerns

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Last weekend a tropical cyclone struck Burma. The death toll is reported to be 50 000 and rising. Al Gore was quick to climb onto his bandwagon. This is what he had to say and some of the immediate responses quoted in CCNet of 7 May 2008.

> And as we're talking today, the death count in Myanmar from the cyclone that hit there yesterday, has been rising from 15,000 to much higher numbers... And last year a catastrophic storm hit Bangladesh. The year before, the strongest cyclone in more than 50 years hit China - and we're seeing consequences that scientists have long predicted might be associated with continued global warming.
>
> --Al Gore, NPR, 6 May 2008

> The world has not warmed in a decade. Moreover, there is little evidence that tropical cyclones have got worse. And any link between hurricanes and warming is highly disputed. Yet Al Gore is already feeding on Burma's dead. Using tragedy to advance an agenda has been a strategy for many global warming activists, and it was just a matter of time before someone found a way to tie the recent Myanmar cyclone to global warming.
>
> --Andrew Bolt, 7 May 2008

> And while these poor souls will undoubtedly see years of unimaginable suffering and the arduous rebuilding of over a million destroyed homes, this man -- who professes his desire to save the planet - saw another opportunity. That it arrived at the end of a one month period in which another wheel fell off the greenhouse gas disinformation bus almost daily only adds to the morass. This was an astonishingly nauseating display -- even for the likes of Gore.
>
> --Marc Sheppard, 7 May 2008

There was a BBC item on the lack of an early warning system.

> As the scale of the disaster in Burma becomes clear, questions are being asked over how much the authorities knew about the magnitude of the approaching storm. India's meteorological agency, which monitors cyclones in the Indian Ocean, says it warned the Burmese authorities 48 hours before the storm struck. Officials from the UN's disaster reduction agency in Geneva say the scale of the devastation suggests there was not a proper early warning system.
>
> --Steve Jackson, BBC News, 6 May 2008

[How do you warn poor communities who have no telephones, radio or TVs? Where do they go? What about the elderly and the sick? What about their livestock and possessions? They cannot afford insurance policies. I have had to address these issues on a number of occasions. There are no easy solutions.]

Likelihood of severe droughts

With the above in mind, consider the likelihood of severe droughts hitting the African continent starting a year from now. Can you imagine the consequences to the people of Zimbabwe for example? Or to those in the conflict-torn countries of Eritrea, Somalia and the Sudan? Or in the arid countries in the West African interior? Is this not of even greater humanitarian concern? Nobody cares.

My prediction is that there is approximately an 80% probability of widespread droughts occurring between now and 2015, and a 20% probability that they will be as severe as the Great Depression (Dustbowl) drought of the early 1930s. Compare these percentages with the conventional design standards for structures vulnerable to flooding where a 2% annual exceedence probability is often used, and for the design of dam spillways, where less than a 1% probability is used in the design. Surely this widespread drought probability with all its humanitarian consequences, should be of even greater concern.

My prediction is solidly based upon the periodic behaviour of annual rainfall and river flow data, and their linkage with synchronous variations in solar activity. Climate alarmists continue to deny the existence of these properties in the hydrometeorological data and their linkage with solar activity. An impasse has therefore been reached on this matter of critical humanitarian importance. It must be resolved as a matter of urgency. This can only be achieved by multidisciplinary studies involving experts in all the related fields, and not just by a few environmentalists and climatologists who have minimal experience in the applied sciences and none at all in the humanitarian sciences.

Need for multidisciplinary studies

Let me give you some examples of successful multidisciplinary research in the past.

In the late 1960s there were concerted international efforts that attempted to determine river flow characteristics required for water resource development from catchment characteristics. By 1970 there were some 600 experimental and observational catchments world-wide. These included several in South Africa, including the Ntambamhlope-de Hoek experimental catchment operated by the then Natal University, and afforestation experiments in the Drakensberg and Western Cape.

The international attempts failed. The only success was the effect of afforestation of previously grass-covered catchments in South Africa. They demonstrated that afforestation decreased run-off. All the other results were inconclusive. I am not aware of any major water resource development systems in the world, whose design and operation is based on catchment process models. The assumption that catchment rehabilitation will increase runoff is as nonsensical as the assumption that wetlands decrease floods.

During the 1980s the CSIR operated the National Programme for Environmental Sciences under the chairmanship of the head of the CSIR. I chaired its Inland Waters Ecosystem committee. Not only was this a multidisciplinary body, but members included researchers, practitioners and senior administrators in the government departments. It was the ideal body for coordinating and financing multidisciplinary research on present and future problems. It was disbanded when the CSIR was commercialised and was itself a competitor for research funding.

I was also a member of the St Lucia Scientific Advisory Council, operated by the Natal Provincial Administration at that time. We carried out joint operations, including surveys of the Mkuze Swamps when an attempt was made to divert water directly from the Mkuze River to 'save' Lake St Lucia. The lake levels were dropping and the salinity was rising. This was caused by the drought of the 1980s. It was feared that the damage was the result of catchment utilisation and would be permanent. We could demonstrate otherwise. Conditions returned to normal, and the lake recovered.

Another major line of multidisciplinary research was the sedimentation of the coastal estuaries. It was feared that this was the consequence of soil erosion in the catchments. By then, we in the Department of Water Affairs had a lot of experience in riverbank erosion and river mechanics generally. We were able to demonstrate that the cause of estuarine sedimentation was the destruction of riverbank vegetation (see illustration below) that changed river channel behaviour, and not upstream soil erosion.

In passing, this is a 'blueprint' used to illustrate our report.

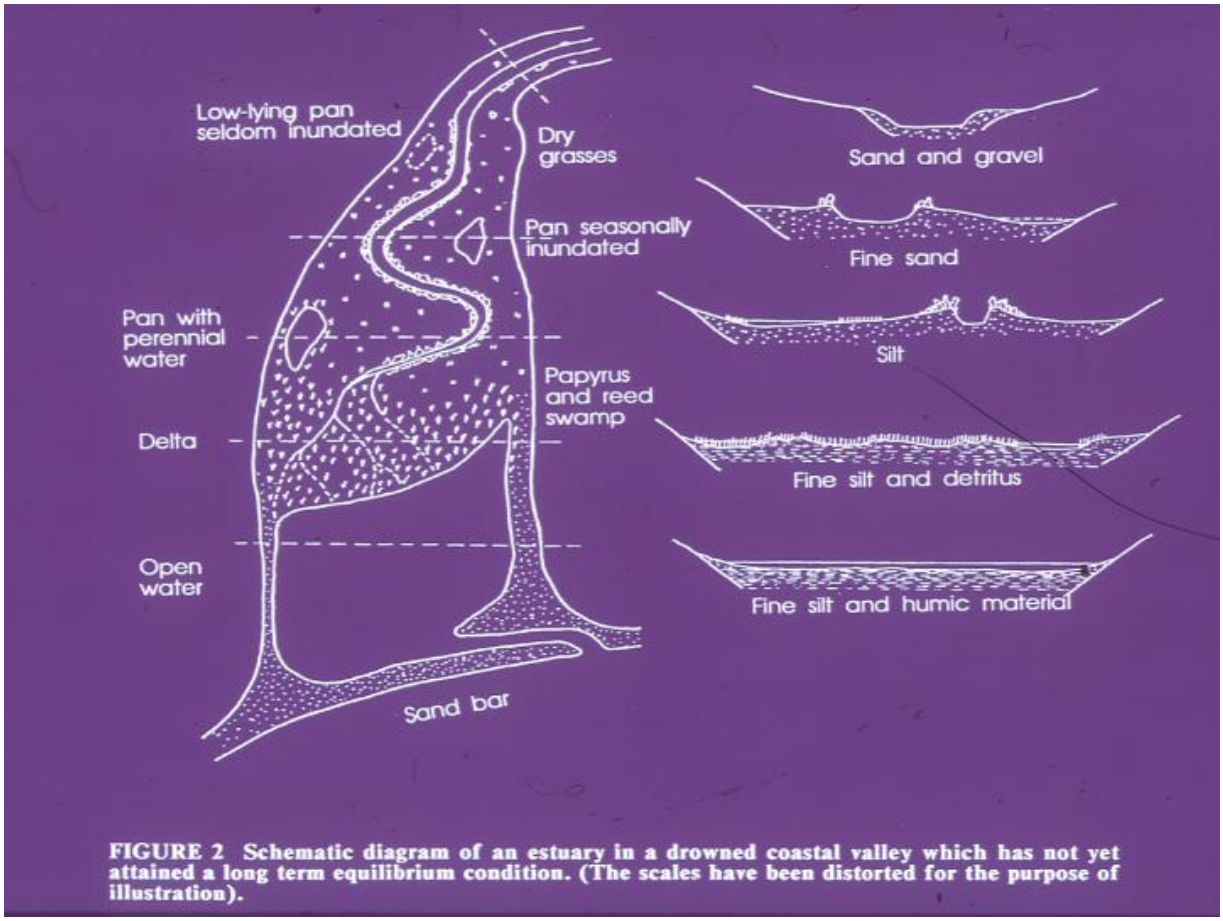

FIGURE 2 Schematic diagram of an estuary in a drowned coastal valley which has not yet attained a long term equilibrium condition. (The scales have been distorted for the purpose of illustration).

There must be many reports on these early multidisciplinary research projects in the archives of the authorities that undertook the research. These are completely ignored by today's environmental lobbyists in order to further their own cause.

Today, the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme -- from cooperation to confrontation. In the absence of a multidisciplinary discussion forum, researchers in the natural sciences have tended to concentrate on their own fields of expertise. Serious problems arise when they recommend solutions in fields that are outside their disciplines.

When those of us in the engineering and applied sciences attempt to demonstrate the errors in their basic assumptions, instead of being invited to participate in multidisciplinary approaches, we are subjected to ridicule and personal vilification.

Another recent development is the birth of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These are well-funded political pressure groups. Their proliferation has started causing internal conflicts such as between the anti-nuclear energy lobby and the anti-coal-fired energy lobby. They cannot both succeed.

Another looming conflict between NGOs is the switch to biofuels. These were propagated by climate change lobbyists to reduce dangerous greenhouse gas emissions from the use of fossil fuels. However, the switch resulted in the widespread destruction of tropical forests, and the cultivation of the cleared land. Environmentalist lobby groups are upset.

Political influence

Initially, this exclusionist policy adopted by environmentalist lobby groups was successful. Even the normally conservative and cautious government departments were persuaded to follow this policy. Climate alarmists frequently claim that the science is settled and our Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) agreed. Not only is this statement demonstrably false, but the IPCC has just announced that it will produce its fifth assessment reports in 2014! Clearly the issue is by no means settled. Why do they keep on refusing to acknowledge this? When will our DEAT realise that it has been seriously misled?

Fortunately, environmentalism has never been a political issue in South Africa. We have other priorities! Nevertheless, we do have strong and influential pressure groups that follow the same exclusionist policy. While these pressure groups all played the same tune, the politicians (nationally as well as internationally) had no difficulty in propagating it for their own benefit. Everybody loves the environment, particularly in sunny South Africa. The environmentalist pressure groups had strong public influence via the press. Everybody was dancing to the same tune, the pressure groups, the press and the politicians.

Disintegration

As reported in my last two memos, the whole system disintegrated during the past fortnight. The Internet is flooded with 'I told you so' criticisms of the IPCC. As you may recall, this whole climate change issue rests on the concept of global warming. Complex mathematical computer models were developed. These were based almost exclusively on the greenhouse gas effect caused by carbon dioxide emissions from power generation, industrial and transport activity.

But global temperatures ceased rising in 1998 and have fallen dramatically during the past year. Arctic and Antarctic temperatures are the lowest in years. The world sea-ice reached an unprecedented 25-year high last month. *(Steve McIntyre 4 May)*. Concerned scientists have pointed out that not a single one of the complex global climate prediction models predicted this 10-year period of static global temperatures and now their sudden reversal.

Other concerned scientists have reiterated their view is that there are neither scientific nor evidential grounds for the assumption that rising carbon dioxide emissions will result in an increase in global temperatures. They now have a solid confirmation of this. *(Vincent Gray 2 May)*.

The solar linked, predictable periodicity in rainfall and river flow data that we developed and which was repeatedly denied by the climate alarmists, is also firmly established. NASA has just announced that it is to fund a $750 million probe of the sun to be launched in 2015. *(Oliver Manuel 5 May)*. Apparently one of the objectives is to determine the influence of the sun on variations in global climate. It will also be too late. I have been performing the same exercise for the past 30 years. NASA could have employed a few junior staff members to replicate our analyses. They will soon confirm the obvious. The NASA researchers have been looking through the wrong end of their telescopes. Solar physicists should begin with the symptoms and then search for the causes, not vice versa.

Climate change science is in disarray. Now political decision makers have to make decisions without any scientific body to advise them. They have been persuaded not to take the conventional step of appointing multidisciplinary commissions of enquiry. I would love to be a fly on the wall at the upcoming UNFCCC discussions in Bonn and the G8 discussions in Japan.

The future.

The need for a multidisciplinary approach to environmental issues is much greater now than it was 20 years ago. Yet there is no coordinating body to operate it. As I see it, the initiative will have to come from the scientific community or the professional engineering bodies or, in the case of water resource development, from the Water Research Commission (WRC). There are no signs of this happening. Everything points to the WRC going in the opposite direction.

The whole of the recently published (March 2008) report ***Towards defining the WRC research portfolio on climate change for 2008-2013*** is based on false science. The WRC apparently made no attempt to evaluate the scientific basis for human-caused climate change. It now proposes allocating large research funding for this futile exercise when there are much higher research priorities that the WRC is neglecting to address.

The same can be said for the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism and the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry. These three bodies fail to realise that there is a considerable body of scientists and engineers in all disciplines who are critical of this whole climate change issue. It would not have been difficult to appoint an independent, multidisciplinary commission of enquiry to evaluate the alarmist claims. It is only a matter of time before these three bodies find themselves facing irate citizens of all political persuasions, when millions of people start suffering from foreseeable agricultural droughts and severe water shortages.

All of this is in the face of the looming severe droughts that will catch the authorities unprepared. This unpreparedness can be directly related to the failure of climate alarmists to participate in, let alone encourage multidisciplinary research. Millions of people are going to suffer as a result of this negligence. Time is running out.

Regards

PS. For your interest I was a member of the United Nations Scientific and Technical Committee on Natural Disasters from 1994 to the end of the international decade in 2000. I was commissioned to undertake a study that I titled ***Risk and society – an African perspective.*** It was financed by the South African Department of Foreign Affairs. I am very familiar with the harrowing conditions endured by millions of people on the African continent. I have a responsibility to speak up for them.