

Allegre's second thoughts

The Deniers -- The National Post's series on scientists who buck the conventional wisdom on climate science

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Claude Allegre, one of France's leading socialists and among her most celebrated scientists, was among the first to sound the alarm about the dangers of global warming.

"By burning fossil fuels, man increased the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere which, for example, has raised the global mean temperature by half a degree in the last century," Dr. Allegre, a renowned geochemist, wrote 20 years ago in *Cles pour la geologie*.. Fifteen years ago, Dr. Allegre was among the 1500 prominent scientists who signed "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity," a highly publicized letter stressing that global warming's "potential risks are very great" and demanding a new caring ethic that recognizes the globe's fragility in order to stave off "spirals of environmental decline, poverty, and unrest, leading to social, economic and environmental collapse."

In the 1980s and early 1990s, when concern about global warming was in its infancy, little was known about the mechanics of how it could occur, or the consequences that could befall us. Since then, governments throughout the western world and bodies such as the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have commissioned billions of dollars worth of research by thousands of scientists. With a wealth of data now in, Dr. Allegre has recanted his views. To his surprise, the many climate models and studies failed dismally in establishing a man-made cause of catastrophic global warming. Meanwhile, increasing evidence indicates that most of the warming comes of natural phenomena. Dr. Allegre now sees global warming as over-hyped and an environmental concern of second rank.

His break with what he now sees as environmental cant on climate change came in September, in an article entitled "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" in *l'Express*, the French weekly. His article cited evidence that Antarctica is gaining ice and that Kilimanjaro's retreating snow caps, among other global-warming concerns, come from natural causes. "The cause of this climate change is unknown," he states matter of factly. There is no basis for saying, as most do, that the "science is settled."

Dr. Allegre's skepticism is noteworthy in several respects. For one, he is an exalted member of France's political establishment, a friend of former Socialist president Lionel Jospin, and, from 1997 to 2000, his minister of education, research and technology, charged with improving the quality of government research through closer co-operation with France's educational institutions. For another, Dr. Allegre has the highest environmental credentials. The author of early environmental books, he fought successful battles to protect the ozone layer from CFCs and public health from lead pollution. His break with scientific dogma over global warming came at a personal cost: Colleagues in both the governmental and environmental spheres were aghast that he could publicly question the science behind climate change.

But Dr. Allegre had allegiances to more than his socialist and environmental colleagues. He is, above all, a scientist of the first order, the architect of isotope geodynamics, which showed that the atmosphere was primarily formed early in the history of the Earth, and the geochemical modeller of the

early solar system. Because of his path-breaking cosmochemical research, NASA asked Dr. Allegre to participate in the Apollo lunar program, where he helped determine the age of the Moon. Matching his scientific accomplishments in the cosmos are his accomplishments at home: Dr. Allegre is perhaps best known for his research on the structural and geochemical evolution of the Earth's crust and the creation of its mountains, explaining both the title of his article in l' Express and his revulsion at the nihilistic nature of the climate research debate.

Calling the arguments of those who see catastrophe in climate change "simplistic and obscuring the true dangers," Dr. Allegre especially despairs at "the greenhouse-gas fanatics whose proclamations consist in denouncing man's role on the climate without doing anything about it except organizing conferences and preparing protocols that become dead letters." The world would be better off, Dr. Allegre believes, if these "denouncers" became less political and more practical, by proposing practical solutions to head off the dangers they see, such as developing technologies to sequester CO₂. His dream, he says, is to see "ecology become the engine of economic development and not an artificial obstacle that creates fear."

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CV OF A DENIER:

Claude Allegre received a Ph D in physics in 1962 from the University of Paris. He became the director of the geochemistry and cosmochemistry program at the French National Scientific Research Centre in 1967 and in 1971, he was appointed director of the University of Paris's Department of Earth Sciences. In 1976, he became director of the Paris Institut de Physique du Globe. He is an author of more than 100 scientific articles, many of them seminal studies on the evolution of the Earth using isotopic evidence, and 11 books. He is a member of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and the French Academy of Science.

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