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Hemphill: Why are we so happy to be scared?

By Alan Polk Hemphill

It is a part of many people's nature to be scared – why else the popularity of scary movies and television series "Fear Factor"?

It is that very nature that is the source of our concerns about Y2K, Alar, Saccharin, Three-Mile Island, and yes – global cooling and global warming.

About 18,000 years ago, in the most recent "Great Ice Age" (there have been many), several hundred feet of glacial ice covered what is now New York City. Obviously, the earth has warmed since then, much to the delight of the current residents of New York City.

And the earth continues to warm, with occasional backward slides – as in 1816 when New England declared "The Year Without a Summer" and there was a HUGE snow storm in June and July. Europe has also suffered throwback colds; the River Thames froze over sufficiently for "Frost Fairs" to be held on the river in the 1600s.

Quite obviously, the earth is warmer now than in those days, and most certainly a great deal warmer than when glaciers covered one-third of the United States a mere 18,000 years ago – and this warming is continuing. It may indeed continue until the ocean reaches El Cajon – as it has many times in the past from glacial melting. It may warm until again crocs ply the waters above the Arctic Circle – as has happened in the past.

It is natural to think of history as beginning the day we were born, but paleoclimatologists know better. Every time I see a story that "scientists say," I cringe – scientists come in many different flavors. I spent many years as a computer scientist – and I know Jack about climate.

Historical climatology is a specialty about which meteorologists know about as much as I do, which is to say – nothing. Even historians measure only a few thousand years...nothing in earth terms. Geologists are better, and paleoclimatologists are best...but even they run strictly on approximations. How accurately – which is to say to how many decimal points – do you think tree rings, ice cores, or ocean cores measure?

We are talking gross approximations at best – but at least we can measure cold ages by glacial drift, and warm ages by ocean rises. When I was a child I collected trilobite fossils – ocean crustaceans – in San Antonio, Texas. They were deposited there in the middle of Texas when the Arctic Ocean met the Gulf of Mexico in an ancient global warming that melted the glaciers around the world!

The same "scientists" scared us to death in 1974 when global cooling (or

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nuclear winter) made the cover of Time magazine. Global cooling, at least as caused by "man" was a scary farce, and so is global warming.

Global warming is real, but man is so insignificant a part of the cycle of nature that to concern ourselves with our being a cause is simply to be happy in being scared.

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