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THE BLOG

# Climate Change Deniers Don't Want Us to Connect the Dots on Extreme Weather

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I've just had a fascinating up close and personal experience of the right-wing climate denial echo chamber in action. It all started with an ABC Australia report on Thursday, by a journalist who apparently thought he had a scoop in publishing information from a purportedly secret document produced by the Global Campaign for Climate Action (GCCA).

The GCCA is an [alliance of NGOs](#) for which I serve as the Executive Director.

The document in question was a resource for communicating to public audiences the scientific conclusions of the latest IPCC report on the link between climate change and extreme weather. The report shows that climate change has already, or will in the future increase the frequency and severity of many kinds of extreme weather (strange that THAT wasn't the headline news). The fact that the document was published on our website and had been distributed to hundreds of people apparently escaped him.

The journalist sought a comment from Australia's version of the Heartland Institute, the right-wing think thank [Institute of Public Affairs'](#) Tim Wilson. This was like



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waving a checkered start flag to set the rest of the deniersphere in motion.

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characterized as a “lobby group” (we’re not) and our talking points were referred to as a “spin sheet” (in quotation marks, as if the journalist was quoting from the document itself — he wasn’t).

*The Australian* regularly distorts and misrepresents issues around climate science, [as documented](#) by an Australian blog, Deltoid.

The story then spread across the denier blogs like the twilight barking chain in Disney’s 101 Dalmatians, with each one dutifully copying and pasting the party line, adding their own twists here and there. It started with a few blogs in Australia and New Zealand, followed by name-brand denial influencers such as Andrew Bolt, a columnist for the *Melbourne Sun Herald*, and [Steve Milloy](#) who runs the U.S. blog JunkScience.

Once these icons of the deniersphere had posted, it didn’t take long for the rest to follow suit, including [Anthony Watts](#) on WhatsUpWithThat and the UK-based [Global Warming Policy Foundation](#), which was recently found to be funded by the Australian billionaire [Michael Hintze](#), who also funds the U.K. Conservative party.

So what is it we are accused of? According to [The Australian](#) — Shock, horror! — the GCCA “encourage[ed] its 300 member organisations to emphasise the link between climate change and extreme weather events, despite uncertainties acknowledged by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.”

In plain English? They don’t want us to connect the dots between what scientists say about climate change and extreme weather trends, and what we have all observed with our own eyes.

Ironically enough, the Murdoch article reinforced the GCCA’s interpretation of the IPCC report. It listed several instances in which the scientists confirmed links between climate change and extreme weather, including temperature extremes, sea level rise and extreme precipitation.

They left out one of our main talking points which, not surprisingly, was the strongest link of all: the report says “it is very likely that the length, frequency, and/or intensity of warm spells or heat waves will increase over most land areas” — with “very likely” being defined as between 90 and 100 percent certain ([PDF](#)).

And the article closed with this comment from Australian climate commissioner Professor Will Steffen:

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This is an early warning sign that if we don't get this underlying warming trend under control there's going to be a lot more heat waves, droughts and intense rainfall events.

While droughts and flooding have never been strangers to Australia, things are definitely heating up down under. From the mid-nineties to around 2010, large parts of the country were in drought, with the mercury hitting new records. The period between 1997 and 2009 was almost certainly the driest since European settlement ([PDF](#)).

Australia has also seen recent unprecedented floods, rain and sea surface temperature records.

### **The Politics of Uncertainty**

So why was this absurd “dog bites man” story so appealing for climate deniers? Because we chose to emphasize areas of high certainty and probability, while pedaling un-certainty is their stock in trade. But in the case of climate change, uncertainty is not a good thing. For one scientist's analysis of why that is the case, [read here](#).

Indeed, history teaches us that the more certain we get with climate science, the more trouble it turns out we're actually in. Consider the progression of IPCC assessment reports starting with the first one in 1990.

One of the few things they could say with certainty was that humans were substantially increasing the atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases, resulting in an additional warming of the Earth's surface. They calculated “with confidence” that CO2 was responsible for over half the enhanced greenhouse effect ([PDF](#)).

By the time of the second IPCC report in 1995, scientists were becoming increasingly concerned about the “discernible human influence on global climate.” ([PDF](#))

The next time around in 2001, [scientists concluded](#) that most of the warming observed over the past 50 years was attributable to human activities. They also emphasized the fact that uncertainty cuts both ways: “Decision making has to deal with uncertainties including the risk of non-linear and/or irreversible changes and entails balancing risk... “

In 2007, the IPCC came out with [its strongest report](#) to date, stating that warming of the climate system is “unequivocal “ and that warming since the mid-20th century is “very likely” (more than 90 percent certainty) due to human greenhouse gas emissions.

The fifth assessment report is currently underway, and is due for publication in 2014. We already know from many publications in the intervening years that



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droughts, heatwaves and extreme precipitation events [have increased](#) and are projected to become more extreme and intense in the future.

24 years after Jim Hansen [famously stated](#) in a congressional hearing that “... it is time to stop waffling so much and say that the evidence is pretty strong that the greenhouse effect is here,” scientists are increasingly doing exactly that.

In a study published in *Nature* [just last week](#), the authors conclude that “the evidence is strong that anthropogenic, unprecedented heat and rainfall extremes are here — and are causing intense human suffering...”

We may be uncertain about *exactly* how much worse things are going to get, but what we do know for certain is that any further delay in addressing the problem will increase both the cost of action and future consequences of climate change. So when the deniers criticize us for [connecting the dots](#), more than ever, we must do exactly that.

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