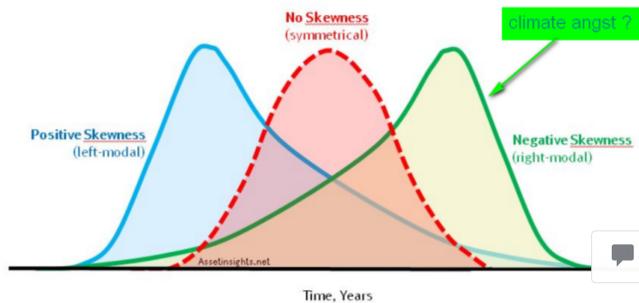


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Has climate alarm peak been crossed?



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There is a [very good comment](#) by Donald Kasper at the [Wattsupwiththat](#) climate blog (15th Feb 2017). He writes that all social issues have a peak of popularity, but that the times of the rise might not be equal to the time of decline. Climate and global warming alarm is now among us since at least 30 years, and it seems that the continuous rise in attention and funding that this problems receives are quite different in many regions of the world. In the USA, the climate problem clearly is not the most burning one for the general population but in Europe the climate-angst train does not yet seem to slow down.

I remember at least 3 big environmental scares that were very popular in the past, and initially seemed to become eternal: the pilfering and **exhaustion** of the Earth's resources and **over-population** (Club of Rome, the "Population Bomb" book by the Ehrlich couple published in 1968) seemed in hindsight to have an attention-grabbing duration of possibly 10 – 15 years. Look [here](#) for a good New York Times article and video on "The Unrealized Horrors of Population Explosion". As neither prophecy, nor those of material exhaustion of the Club of Rome and those of rapid famines predicted by the two Ehrlichs became true, time was ripe for another scare.

During the second half of the 80's, the danger of ambient **radon**, the ubiquitous natural radioactive gas, was pushed to new heights. Many profited from this new angst, mostly research labs and companies that were quick to sell radon mitigation appliances to disturbed house owners (usually a simple fan with some sealing of the caves bottom). A gas that in some rare instances could be a problem was pushed by the media and politicians (as always wanting to show that they care about their voters) to a permanent and extreme danger, allegedly causing a high percentage of the lung cancers (a conclusion that was extrapolated from extreme high radon situations to very low ones, according to the probably wrong No Linear Threshold (LNL) theory still fashionable among many anti-nuclear activists today). New legal maximum concentrations were defined (as for instance 300 Bq/m3 in Luxembourg); in the USA a radon certificate had to be added when a house was sold; and than the problem vanished from the media and the overall attention.

Why did the radon angst disappear? Because the new danger of **global warming** caused by another "pernicious gas", CO2, was ramped up. The avoidance (mitigation) of high radon levels was not a too difficult task; but avoiding CO2, a natural constituent of the atmosphere and an inevitable by-product of fossil energy use, is quite a different beast. No wonder that **climate change** (which replaced global warming when it became clear that there has not been much warming for the last 20 years) became rapidly the poster child of everyone: as for radon, the new danger assured heavy funding in university research, the possibility to produce electricity by non-carbon emitting procedures pushed many parts of the industry into renewable wind and solar devices, and on top the very influential environmental movements had a topic that predictably would have a much longer life-span than the previous scares. As an additional pusher we can see the disappearance of the Cold War worries, the slow-down of traditional religious feelings which were, at least in many parts of the Western World, replaced by the new "quasi-religion" of environmentalism.

All these scares have some solid foundations: a future world population of 11 billion would be unmanageable if technology and science would stand still, so the 1968 angst (as the much earlier prophecies of Malthus) seem quite reasonable in an unchanging world. But this has not happened: the green revolution (which owns so much to Norman Borlaug) increased agricultural yields tremendously without destroying the soils and "nature"; in spite of many ongoing (civil) wars, political unrest, deep corruption etc. poverty has decreased and access to education made quite a jump. When the "Population Bomb" was written (1968) the world population was about 3.6 billion, and today, close to 50 years later, is has doubled to 7.2 billion.

The big environmental scares all ignore the tremendous potential for innovation of humanity. Despite the horrors of wars, environmental damage and political unrest in many parts of the world, the overall picture of the past 50 years commands an optimistic point of view, and not one of fear and depression. Will climate angst follow the past pattern? What makes climate change different is that, depending on your view, it is essential a cause of human evolution and progress, which both were and are heavily tied to energy availability and usage. All the previous scares have found at least a partial solution by human progress (remember that as a general rule the most industrialized countries are also the most eco-conscious ones!), but this one demands a big change in thinking. When we want to avoid pumping more and more CO2 into the atmosphere (my personal opinion still remains that the dangerous consequences will be small), and we have installed solar panels and wind turbines everywhere without seriously solving the intermittency problem of these renewable energies, why do we not see the elephant in the room: nuclear energy has all the needed potential for an abundant and cheap carbon-free energy, and many ways different from those used in the past exist to use nuclear (or fusion) energy in a low-dangerous manner, without a legacy of extremely long radioactive waste.

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