

Lies, Damned Lies, Statistics II — Climate Change

Nobody asked but ...

I didn't want to create the impression in my recent post that I disbelieve climate change. All I'm saying is that it is highly improbable that the data is being gathered in an honest way. And I don't mean honest as opposed to deliberately fallacious. Just as period music should be performed on period instruments to catch the flavor of vintage music, weather data should, ideally, be collected under the same conditions across time.

Here's an example, when I was an early teenager, I lived in St. Matthews, Kentucky. I lived in an outlying subdivision of Louisville. There were mostly just large farms beyond where I lived. Watterson Expressway was not complete. There was no Mall St. Matthews, there was no Oxmoor Plaza. The miles of strip malls between St. Matthews and Middletown were not there. National Weather Service temperature data readings were taken regularly at Bowman Field, at the western edge of St. Matthews. This was circa 1955.

I don't know where the government tests the temperature these days in Louisville. As a scientist, however, I know it cannot be in 1950s St. Matthews. The map coordinates for city hall have not changed, in 60+ years, but almost everything else has. Bowman Field is still there, but in mostly different surroundings.

In scientific data gathering there is a thing called "threats to validity." Science must track moving targets, or else try to correct for the movement. Who makes the decisions about what changes are significant and what adjustments are possible? The scientists themselves must make these decisions, internally. Who dares to assume that scientists never fall for confirmation bias?

Some will claim that the science is "settled." Is life settled, in St. Matthews, or any place else on Earth? I have no beef with the theory that the climate may be getting warmer, just as I would with a sentiment that it was cooling. The average temperature of the Earth is as it should be given the complex of factors. Do I trust activists and politicians to tinker with that complex? Not enough data.

— Kilgore Forelle