

Correcting and Clarifying Hulme and Mahony on the IPCC Consensus

Various newspaper and internet blogs are reporting me as saying that the IPCC has 'misled the press and public into believing that thousands of scientists backed its claims on manmade global warming' whereas in fact only 'a few dozen experts' did so. This story emanates from an article, in press with *Progress in Physical Geography* and posted on my website <http://mikehulme.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Hulme-Mahony-PiPG.pdf>, which reviews 20 years of published literature on the nature of the IPCC and its functions and governance. The relevant section from this paper is the following, which is part of a longer discussion about the nature of uncertainty and consensus in the IPCC assessments ...

"Without a careful explanation about what [consensus] means, this drive for consensus can leave the IPCC vulnerable to outside criticism. Claims such as '2,500 of the world's leading scientists have reached a consensus that human activities are having a significant influence on the climate' are disingenuous. That particular consensus judgement, as are many others in the IPCC reports, is reached by only a few dozen experts in the specific field of detection and attribution studies; other IPCC authors are experts in other fields. But consensus-making can also lead to criticism for being too conservative, as Hansen (2007) has most visibly argued."

Three things should be clear from this. First, I did not say the 'IPCC misleads' anyone – it is claims that are made by other commentators, such as the caricatured claim I offer in the paper, that have the potential to mislead. Second, they have a potential to mislead if they give the impression that every statement in IPCC reports is 'signed off' by every IPCC author and reviewer. Patently they are not, and cannot. Third, it is the chapter lead authors – say 10 to 20 experts - on detection and attribution who craft the sentence about detection and attribution, which is then scrutinised and vetted by reviewers and government officials. Similarly, statements about what may happen to the meridional overturning circulation (MOC) of the ocean are crafted by those expert in ocean science, statements about future sea-level rise by sea-level experts, and so on.

The point of this bit of our article was to draw attention to the need for a more nuanced understanding of what an IPCC 'consensus' is – as I say: *"Without a careful explanation about what it means, this drive for consensus can leave the IPCC vulnerable to outside criticism."* The IPCC consensus does not mean – clearly cannot possibly mean – that every scientist involved in the IPCC process agrees with every single statement in the IPCC! Some scientists involved in the IPCC did not agree with the IPCC's projections of future sea-level. Giving the impression that the IPCC consensus means everyone agrees with everyone else – as I think some well-meaning but uninformed commentaries do (or have a tendency to do) – is unhelpful; it doesn't reflect the uncertain, exploratory and sometimes contested nature of scientific knowledge.

Mike Hulme, Norwich
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