

Climate Change: Assessing the Risk

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.4 (posted on 26 November 2019)
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There is no authentic “debate” about anthropogenic climate change. The arguments against it were debunked years ago, laid to rest by overwhelming evidence that the earth’s atmosphere is, indeed, heating up, and that human activity is the root cause. The only people who continue to deny climate change are idiots or greedmeisters.

In the center of the bell curve — which is where a majority Americans are with regard to climate change — what was once mainly concern about air pollution, recycling, and paper or plastic at the grocery store has shifted over recent years toward feelings of greater urgency, even if that urgency is from a vague and ill-defined threat. The consensus among the public now, as opposed to ten or twenty years ago, is that something must be done to safeguard civilization and humanity from the nasty effects of a much hotter earth. People in the center are slowly becoming educated. Many people trust that technology will rescue us.

Out on the wings of the bell curve are two factions that have totally divergent opinions and beliefs about climate change, but which end up in a weird kind of agreement about what we should do.

One camp is what we might call “climate change denialists.” This motley crew has never believed in the reality of anthropogenic climate change (meaning, caused by humans), and still doesn’t. Seemingly no amount of increasingly obvious evidence — melting ice caps, retreating glaciers, accelerating extinctions of flora and fauna, increasingly severe storms, dead zones in the oceans, etc. — makes a dent in their staunch opinion. Climate change? What climate change? All that talk is just propaganda for liberal scientists worried about their grant money. And anyway, science is bogus. It’s a coup to destroy capitalism, and with it our beautiful, infinitely-growing economy. Screw clean, renewable energy. Fossil fuels are what created modern civilization, and we should dance with what brung us. This whole climate change/global warming brouhaha is a nothing-burger. Thank God for Exxon. Drill, baby, drill.

The other camp is “climate change doomers.” This group, like the denialists, includes people of many diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and formative opinions, but among its members are a small number of scientists — not just climate change researchers, but scientists of all stripes and from the entire range of disciplines. In general, climate change doomers believe that we have missed our window of opportunity, that the accelerating feedback loops that will result in

catastrophic heating of the earth have already been triggered, and that nothing we do to mitigate the disastrous effects on civilization and humanity will prevent the collapse of the biosphere, ravaging of life-supporting habitat, and the likely extinction of our species, perhaps sooner than later.

Needless to say, this view isn't comforting, and it sure as hell isn't popular. Nevertheless, the doomer club is growing faster than the denialist faction.

The foremost member of the doomers is Dr. Guy McPherson, whose academic credentials are long and illustrious, most recently as Professor Emeritus of Conservation Biology at the University of Arizona. While not a climate change researcher himself, McPherson began collecting in the 1980s the available data on anthropogenic climate change and its implications for organisms. Over the past two decades, the accumulating evidence shifted McPherson's focus from the effects of long-term climate change on all organic life forms to the looming feedback loops that could cause abrupt, dramatic, and irreversible climate change that would have catastrophic effects on the ecosystem and earth's existing family of species, including humans. McPherson concluded that the probability of near-term human extinction was extremely high. His initial estimate, made in 2002, for the end of our species was 2030, but McPherson has since moved up that timeline to 2026.

Many people who accept and believe in the reality of climate change are shocked and aghast by McPherson's prediction of our collective demise, especially so given the short time frame. After all, 2026 is only seven years away. How could it be possible for humanity to completely die off in less than a decade from now? OK, things may be worrisome in the biosphere, and lord knows we don't live in harmony with nature, but life is going on pretty much as we expect, right? Surely we have many more decades to ameliorate the negative effects of climate disruption. How could we be wiped out by climate disruption in so short a time, now a mere seven years away? Is McPherson crazy?

Determining and making a judgment about whether or not anyone might be crazy is no easy task. Besides the obvious difficulties inherent in using a generic and mushy word such as "crazy" as the header are the many more subtle complexities, contradictions, and paradoxes that surround any assessment of a person's mental health, emotional sanity, and psychological or spiritual maturity. Like beauty, insanity may be mostly in the eye of the beholder.

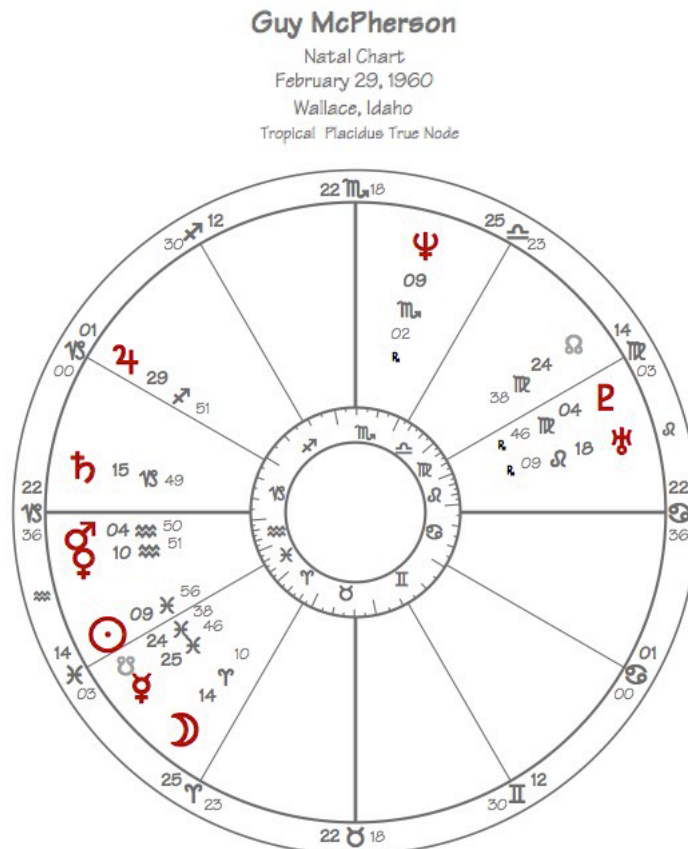
Over the past three years, I've watched many videos online that are about or feature Guy McPherson — critical commentaries, solo presentations, interviews, even one-on-one debates with colleagues. In his writing and on-screen presence, McPherson is invariably calm and competent. He comes off as completely well-informed. Also, he handles skepticism gracefully, which is important for someone in his admittedly pessimistic position. All of that lobbies for McPherson's sincerity, but that doesn't imply that I believe his prediction. Sincerity doesn't guarantee accuracy.

Neither does authority. By itself, McPherson's reputation as a respected academic doesn't impress me much. That's just me, of course. I threw out long ago any belief that I.Q., career success, and institutional respectability mean much in terms of trustworthiness, reliability or insight into reality. Consider JFK's cabinet, lauded at the time as "the best and brightest." Yeah, sure. Those damned fools — almost all of whom were inveterate Cold Warriors who fervently embraced the American Empire — engineered and led us into the Vietnam War. Basically, credentials count for very little to me. I feel the same way about wealth, prestige, and fame. All those features are very meaningful to many people, but not to me. I am a confirmed skeptic about all authority.

Another option for me in assessing how much credit to give McPherson's dire prediction is astrology.

Some advocates of astrology believe that natal charts can or should be able to tell us whether someone is crazy or sane. Not true. That's not the language through which astrology speaks. What it can tell us, however, is potentially meaningful and relevant information about how a given person's experience of reality is naturally structured. From that, we can draw our own conclusions, but any such judgments always carry a considerable risk of error.

All that said, I do have Guy McPherson's birth chart. I presume but cannot confirm with certainty that the birth time is accurate. Here is the chart:



OK, just how trustworthy might McPherson be as an authoritative source about humanity's future or lack thereof?

After 50 years as a full-time astrologer, chart analysis is second-nature to me. It goes on inside my head at lightning speed. I don't spend hours poring over charts. The information is there and accessible at a glance. This is not to suggest that I commit everything to memory. I don't. In sessions with clients, I want most of my consciousness reserved for the challenge of interacting with another human being in meaningful conversation. That's why I have the chart in front of me during the session, so I can reference it on-the-fly as the conversation shifts. The kind of delineations that most astrological textbooks explain is instantaneous for me.

Writing about textbook-style natal chart analysis is less than compelling, however. I've done a lot of that over the past half-century, and, while I continue to do some of it in these commentaries and published articles, it has become somewhat tiresome, since it's sort of kindergarten astrology 101. So, allow me to forego that here, cut to the chase, and give my thoughts as to the question at hand.

Where climate doom and the possible near-term extinction of humanity are concerned, I don't regard Guy McPherson as an unimpeachable source. The problem is not his data (which is, as far as I know, sound science), but his conclusions, and, more to the point, McPherson's apparent certainty of belief about those conclusions. His chart tells me that Guy McPherson is a "visionary" in the poetic and metaphysical sense. That may mean that McPherson is prescient and accurate in the Cassandra-like vision of what he sees coming. It may, however, mean that he has been seduced by a bad dream and is, to some extent at least, self-deluded. That could conceivably be said about any of us, but I'm not suggesting it from a universal level that applies to everyone. McPherson's chart is very clear and fairly dramatic in presenting that particular dilemma as a basic orientation within his life-journey.

In short, I have no doubt that Guy McPherson believes what he's saying. I find no reason astrologically to question his sincerity, and I don't feel that he's out to make a quick buck from social notoriety. While the paradox of self-interest versus selfless service is an important and even critical dimension in McPherson's chart, I don't see it as a conflict.

Still, I don't buy his prediction that the human species will go extinct by 2026. I consider McPherson to be correct in his pessimism, but wrong in the tone of his prediction and its time frame. The feedback loops he references in his prediction may indeed imperil civilization, and I'm not at all sure that there's anything we can do to eliminate or even minimize their impact.

I agree that humanity is in deep trouble. I just think it will take longer to play out. Also, I feel that the possibility of our species' extinction is probably beyond our capacity to predict with any certainty.