

Winters in Granny's day

There was never anything new about global warming as far as I was concerned. I knew it from experience. When I was young, winters really were winters. I look back fondly to the skating trips and hot cocoa of my youth. Nowadays winters are just pathetic. The younger generation doesn't know what it's missing; I'm glad I'm old enough to have experienced the real thing.

And people today are not the first to find that winters are getting milder. My mother was always talking about the really severe winters at the beginning of the last century, while Granny could trump her stories with tales of yet harder winters from her own youth in the late nineteenth century.

My faith in increasingly mild winters was somewhat shaken, though, when I got my job at the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute (KNMI). I spotted a graph of winter temperatures from 1880 onward, and no matter how I looked at it, it refused to go up. Apparently there was something wrong with the way temperatures were measured – otherwise the graph just didn't make sense.

Now, twenty-five years on, I'm glad to say that temperature graph is going up. Only since the nineteen eighties, but it just goes to show. My mother and Granny might have been wrong but I at long last have been proven right, or at least partly right. And the temperature increase seems to bear out those articles you read about the greenhouse effect and global warming. Of course, you have to allow for the odd blip. In the winter of 1997, for instance, we Dutch were treated to the rare spectacle of the Elfstedentocht skating marathon – and the ice has to be really thick for that to happen.

But recently my faith in the cause and effect of warming was to be shattered. This happened because of the KNMI's Climate Report. Although it said that the Netherlands has indeed become warmer, it also claimed that this warming could not be directly attributed to the greenhouse effect. Our recent milder winters appear to be a temporary phenomenon, caused by the ocean, rather than a consequence of global warming. But sooner or later the greenhouse effect will systematically push up temperatures, climate fluctuations or not. The climate system now looks complicated indeed.

What have I learnt from all this? Well, first that one has to be careful about basing conclusions about climate change on one's own experience. One always vividly remembers the cold spells and heat waves of one's youth – boring weather doesn't leave an impression. Second, it is very difficult to detect climate change in a country like ours, where the weather is so variable. And if changes do occur it is often premature to attribute them to a specific cause. Third, Granny has been proved right, albeit posthumously. The Earth's climate is about to change greatly, and within a few decades, the climate of my country will be changed too. Never before has the global climate been changing at such a rate. In this sense we live in unusual times, for good or for ill.

The moral is that you shouldn't rely solely on climate experts, but should also listen to previous generations. Because when all is said and done, it was my Granny's stories that caused me to become aware of climate change. Granny's notion about global change might have been wrong in her day, but it's becoming right in our century. So Granny scored a hole in one using a bent club, so to speak. And my interest persists to this day.

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