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Review: Behind the Curve: Science and the Politics of Global Warming

By Joshua P. Howe

Reviewed by Ryder W. Miller
San Francisco, California, USA

Howe, Joshua P. *Behind the Curve: Science and the Politics of Global Warming*. Foreword by William Cronon. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2014. ISBN: 978029599368. 290 pp. US\$34.95 Series: Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books.

Behind the Curve by Reed College History and Environmental Studies Professor Joshua Howe is a fascinating tale of how we have gotten into the mess we are in with climate change. Howe tells the story embedded in a longer historical tale of American foreign relations and the intersection between science and activism. One might think that the book has too many tangents, but it avoids being the product of tunnel vision.

The story starts long ago, but Howe begins the in-depth coverage with the Keeling curve. Charles David Keeling measured atmospheric carbon concentrations, discovering a rise from less than 320 ppm in the 1960s to over 400 ppm in the present. It is a tale of tragedy that will have wide ranging deleterious effects for the entire planet. Howe, who adapted his dissertation into this book for Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books, puts the tragedy in a political context:

“Climate science was born of the Cold War, and the politics of global warming emerged against a national and international political backdrop dominated by the conflict.” (p. 170-171)

As told here, there was also conflict between environmentalists who were activists and scientists who did not really know how to reach the public in powerful ways. In addition, there were doubts and politics among scientists searching for definitive proof and predictable consequences.

The history told here is fascinating, with each sentence filled with valuable information and insights. One is likely to want to highlight most of the text on every dense page. The sentences were sometimes redundant, but at the same time, they embellished the stories in greater detail. There are varying points of view on this story with people falling into different roles and political camps. One may wonder if this tale may have been told differently, but Howe tells it as a concerned scholar.

The book is history rather than current events and the bulk of it is over by the Millennium. Howe succeeds in giving the reader a full appreciation of what has transpired. There is some discussion about what happened since the Clinton presidency ended (2001), but the bulk of the story is of the history that transpired before his time as president.

This book will serve as a great environmental history book, which champions the scientists, most of whom have been sounding the alarm about this for decades. It provides a fuller story of how we have not yet been able to solve the problem of global warming and will appeal to readers who want to be more fully informed about this issue that concerns us all. The book is readable and eloquent, and not controversial in the way that the reader has to know the subject of environmentalism well enough not to be manipulated or have their perspectives damaged by it. Series editor William Cronin starts the book with a forward that readers will find intriguing.

Howe, like hopefully the rest of us, has found hope despite this tale of tragedy in local action:

“Amid the depressing and desperate realities of global warming history and contemporary climate change policy, it is this growing willingness to engage in difficult moral discussions about global warming at home that gives me hope.”
(p. 208)

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