



# The Global Warming Policy Foundation

55 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL  
0207 340 6038 [www.thegwpf.org](http://www.thegwpf.org) [info@thegwpf.org](mailto:info@thegwpf.org)

10<sup>th</sup> March 2021

## BBC Complaints

PO Box 1922  
Darlington  
DL3 0UR

Dear Sir/Madam,

### Re. A Perfect Planet - Episode 5, Humans

The programme, *A Perfect Planet*, 'Humans', broadcast on BBC One on Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> January, contained some seriously inaccurate and misleading statements about climate change and its impacts. There was a consistent bias towards exaggerating the negative impacts of climate change and overstating extreme weather trends, and political statements about energy policy were made that were not appropriately signalled or balanced by alternative perspectives. The programme is still available on the BBC iPlayer platform.

In an extended sequence, a number of misleading claims were made which both collectively and individually, create an inaccurate impression of changing patterns of extreme weather.

It was stated:

“We’re getting more... radical, extreme, unpredictable, out of control events.”

Of hurricanes in particular, that “they’re now over and over and over again... every season”.

Niall McCann then suggests we have been seeing “More fires, more droughts, more floods.”

The overriding impression that is left with the viewer is that all the main forms of extreme weather are getting worse. But the scientific evidence contradicts this central claim.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s recent *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C*, published in 2018, says:

“Numerous studies towards and beyond AR5 have reported a decreasing trend in the global number of tropical cyclones and/or the globally accumulated cyclonic energy...”

There is consequently low confidence in the larger number of studies reporting increasing trends in the global number of very intense cyclones.”

This does not exclude the possibility that in certain locations, hurricanes have been made worse by climate change. But equally, in other locations there may have been fewer or less intense hurricanes. A balanced documentary would have explored the nuances of climate science in this regard.

Claims of “more fires” around the globe are contradicted by the scientific evidence, which has been documented by the Royal Society (see: <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/full/10.1098/rstb.2015.0345>). The global area burned by fires has declined over past decades, and there is strong evidence to suggest that there is less fire in the global landscape today than centuries ago. NASA satellite data also shows that there has also been a global drop in fires in more recent times: <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/90493/researchers-detect-a-global-drop-in-fires>

The IPCC’s *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C* also reaffirmed that there was *low confidence* in the sign of any global trend in drought since the 1950s, and *low confidence* in the attribution of global trends in drought. It is simply not true to say that there has been “more drought” and insinuate this is because of climate change. One thing we do know is that far fewer people are dying from droughts and other extreme weather event types.

On floods, the IPCC 1.5°C report reaffirmed the finding from the 5<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report that:

“There is low confidence due to limited evidence, however, that anthropogenic climate change has affected the frequency and the magnitude of floods.

They added:

“Using the available streamflow data, Dai (2016) showed that long-term (1948-2012) flow trends are statistically significant only for 27.5% of the world’s 200 major rivers, with negative trends outnumbering the positive ones.”

The impression created by the documentary is of “radical...out of control” increases in flooding, and this is clearly not supported by the scientific evidence.

The strong overriding message was that all forms of extreme weather were getting worse, with little, if no attempt to explore the actual science on these topics. This is particularly damaging as it feeds in to already unbalanced public perceptions of the risks posed by climate change.

Dr Gavin Schmidt, who is Director of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, recently said<sup>1</sup> in response to the claim that “people tend to say climate change causes more extreme weather”:

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/environment/article/Will-climate-change-make-winter-storms-more-15958789.php>

*They do say that but it's not correct... It doesn't make any sense to say that all extremes are going to change because of global warming or they're all going to go in one direction.*

It is telling that Schmidt is one of the world's leading climatologists, whereas contributors who appeared on the programme made claims about extreme weather events and their connection to climate change, despite not having any particular expertise in that topic. Dr Niall McCann being an explorer and biologist, Jeremy Rifkin, an economic and social theorist and Dr Asha de Vos, a marine biologist. Rifkin is also an advocate for the controversial 'De-Growth' policy, a concept controversial even among environmentalists.

There was also a section of the programme looking at energy policy which was particularly unbalanced. Jeremy Rifkin stated: "Coal, oil, gas, uranium, they're expensive...the sun and wind is free." He also described how the sun and wind do not send us bills or invoices.

This is a false dichotomy and therefore misleads viewers. Oil does not "send us a bill" either. The costs involved with all these resources are associated with their extraction and conversion into usable energy. Wind and solar are not particularly energy dense sources of energy and have particular costs associated with their intermittency and impact on grid frequency. If they represented "free" energy sources then we would already be using them to meet all of our energy needs.

Dr Niall McCann states that "...we're going to have to shift how we generate that power from non-renewables to renewables... It needs to happen everywhere, and it needs to happen much, much faster." Alongside all the other comments that were being made, what is clearly being presented is a political argument about which energy sources should be used in the future. But these political arguments, from contributors that are well known for their activism in this area, were not appropriately signalled as such. Nor were they balanced by an alternative perspective - not on this programme or anywhere else in the BBC's output. The BBC is demonstrably in breach of its own guidelines on political impartiality.

I hope that you will give careful consideration to my complaint, and that you will take the appropriate steps to rectify these unfortunate breaches of the BBC's editorial guidelines that have taken place.

Yours faithfully,



Harry Wilkinson  
Head of Policy, The Global Warming Policy Foundation