

Wall Street Journal misquotes IPCC to advocate inaction on climate change

A new editorial in the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) distorts and cherry-picks quotations from the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, asserting that the report walks back on climate alarm. In fact, we're in more climate trouble than we've ever been, and the report makes this clear. Any fair reading of the report itself leaves an indisputable conclusion: Neither economic growth nor adaptation will solve the climate change problem on its own.

- **The report's summary is faithful to the underlying material.** The WSJ's so-called evidence – a “contradictory” quote on migrations – is a gross misrepresentation.
- The science of global warming is settled in that **climate scientists are agreed that humans are causing warming and this will eventually lead to untenable conditions.** The rest are details.
- Climate change threatens economic growth. Arguing that a strong economy is “insurance” against climate change presents **a false choice between growth and cutting carbon pollution. In fact, the economic costs will be catastrophic if we don't cut carbon pollution.**

The IPCC Summary for Policymakers (SPM) is faithful to the underlying material. The reason the SPM exists is because the underlying discussion of scientific evidence can be confusing, and even seemingly contradictory at times. That is precisely why having a summary of the balance of evidence is helpful and necessary. The WSJ demonstrates this admirably by searching for out-of-context quotes that appear to contradict the SPM, while paying no regard to the balance of evidence. By using the phrase “sexed up” to describe the process, the WSJ parrots claims first set forth in the British [Daily Mail](#). The IPCC itself has [issued a statement](#) rebutting the Mail story, [alongside others](#) that serve to refute many of the WSJ's claims.

On the topic of migrations, where the editorial seeks to dismiss the possibility of climate refugees, the WSJ provides a single quote from Chapter 9. The WSJ piece truncates the beginning of the quote, which actually starts with “For Tacoli (2009), the current alarmist predictions...” etc. The omission makes clear that the quote is describing conclusions of a single study (Tacoli 2009), NOT the conclusions of the chapter as a whole. This omission twists the quote to mean something the IPCC never intended.

Meanwhile, Chapter 12 [states](#): “Major extreme weather events have in the past led to significant population displacement, and changes in the incidence of extreme events will amplify the challenges and risks of such displacement.” Other chapters also contain research supporting the links between climate change and displacement. The SPM summarizes these conclusions accurately.

The basic science of global warming is, in fact, settled. Generally, when people say the science is settled, they don't mean we know everything there is to know about global warming. They mean that [we know enough](#) that it's clear what needs to be done. We know that humans are causing warming through greenhouse gas emissions, and that if this continues it will lead to severe economic, ecological, and humanitarian consequences.

Thus, the latest IPCC report by no means "vindicates" the WSJ's perpetual nitpicking over irrelevant scientific and economic debates. The IPCC is still working on very difficult questions such as the aggregate global costs of adaptation, mitigation, and climate change impacts, and the dates that various impacts will arrive. As they should, the authors acknowledge uncertainties and limits to long-term future predictions. But in the big picture, pinning down exact values for these questions won't change the recommended course of action.

Adaptation and economic growth are not an alternative to mitigation of climate change. The editorial concludes with some devout quotations from the conservative economic party line: "The best environmental policy is economic growth" and regulation of emissions "will make the world poorer." This is a nice way to seem interested in preventing catastrophic impacts without having to support any policy changes to fix the problem. However, it has little relationship to the future the IPCC predicts.

Adaptation and economic growth will help to reduce the severity of climate impacts in the near term. However, mitigation remains essential at the same time (see WG2 Ch.14). Without checks on emissions, climate change will progress farther than any kind of economic or adaptive "insurance policy" will be able to deal with. In fact, runaway climate change would likely cause [serious disruption](#) to the global economy, further reducing our ability to adapt or compensate for impacts.

On a hopeful note, [new data shows](#) that the "decoupling" of emissions from economic growth is beginning. With the right policies and the right technology, growth of our economy will be able to continue steadily, while reducing emissions.