

## Green vs. Greed

(Walking on Earth column published in the Tucson Green Times, March 2010)

**By Melanie Lenart**

Some of the character attacks by global warming skeptics go to the heart of an issue affecting us all: Just where in this world do we draw the line between being an objective observer and an active participant?

Al Gore faces such attacks. Gore's books about climate change include the 2009 *Our Choice: A Plan to Solve the Climate Crisis*, a valuable resource for anyone concerned about making the switch from fossil fuels to alternative energy. Climate change skeptics have dubbed him the world's first "carbon billionaire" because some of the millions he invested in green businesses are paying off.

Some of these same skeptics accuse scientists in general of profiting from concern over climate change. They point their fingers at research grants.

It's not surprising that in a culture as jaded as ours, where Americans belatedly learned that officials fabricated reasons to go to war with oil-rich Iraq, we tend to "follow the money" to seek motives for action. That's always something worth examining with an objective eye.

Science tells us there's no such thing as an objective observer, however. Decades ago, physicists were surprised to discover that merely observing a particle would change its behavior. Similar concepts apply to society.

Scientists observing that the planet is warming, and reporting this news to the world, can influence the course of events. It may even be that some of these scientists are indeed hoping to influence the course of events with their reports. After all, they live on the planet, too, and many have children and grandchildren.

Are they really doing it for the money, though? I would venture that their motives have more to do with a concern for the future than an interest in building wealth.

Most grant money supports students, other researchers and universities rather than the people leading the projects. (For the record, I don't head any grants, so I'm speaking merely from observation of others.)

Getting grants won't bring scientists lives of leisure. If anything, getting grants typically require scientists to work harder.

Similarly, Gore gives away and invests much of the money headed his way. For instance, he reportedly puts all the money from sales of *Our Choice* into a charity he helped found, The Alliance for Climate Protection.

These actions do not speak of people fueled by greed.

Let's face it. Money is not the only thing that motivates people. Concern for the future offers a serious motivation for many of the people – scientists, politicians and citizens – working on climate change issues.

Sometimes being a good citizen requires speaking up. Our country's founders recognized the value of free speech. The concept carries many subtleties, but one underlying concept is that the truth will rise to the top, an eventual winner in the competition of ideas.

Our society also has been built upon the concept of a free market economy. Here, the idea is that competition among products will lead to companies providing goods and services at a more affordable cost, with efficiency, inventiveness and forward-thinking rewarded.

Along those lines, we can't ignore the power of the marketplace to create change. Al Gore maintains he is putting his money where his mouth is by supporting green business. Coming from someone who sold a profitable tobacco farm because he recognized that smoking creates a health risk, this comment rings true.

Investing in green business and research is a powerful way to make a difference. Money can transform how we produce energy, allowing us to replace high-carbon fossil fuels with alternatives such as solar and wind powered electricity. Even solar-powered lanterns can help citizens of India bypass traditional fuels.

So go ahead, follow the money. Just be sure to check not only where it goes initially, but also where it ends up.