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## **A Chilling Tale**

A review of “State of Fear” by Michael Crichton

By Ronald Bailey

We know that nature can kill. What most people don't know is that stupid ideas about nature can kill, too.

In “State of Fear” (HarperCollins, 603 pages, \$27.95), Michael Crichton delivers a lightning-paced technopolitical thriller that turns on a controversial notion: All that talk we've been hearing about global warming -- you know, polar ice caps melting, weather systems sent into calamitous confusion, beach weather lingering well into January -- might be at best misguided, at worst dead wrong. Think “The Da Vinci Code” with real facts, violent storms and a different kind of faith altogether.

The book opens with the murder of an American graduate student studying ocean-wave dynamics. (“State of Fear” is the sort of thriller that makes even nerd-occupations seem daring.) A boatyard owner renting deep-sea submarines in Vancouver is also murdered, as is a man purchasing illicit rocket guide wires in London.

We soon learn that such skulduggery is being coordinated, or so it seems, by Nick Drake, a Ralph Nader clone -- intense, single-minded and (apologies to Mr. Nader's many fans) unhinged. He is president of the National Environmental Resource Fund (NERF), an organization founded by lawyers, not scientists, and devoted to pushing a radical environmental agenda. The fund is clearly modeled on the real-life Natural Resources Defense Council, whose annual budget is about the same: \$44 million.

To keep the donations rolling in, Drake is trying to induce a perpetual state of fear in the public by marketing the hell out of predictions of catastrophic global warming. Global warming -- as we are all too well aware these days -- results from burning fossil fuels that load the atmosphere with heat-trapping carbon dioxide. Drake's problem is that people just aren't alarmed enough to send in those vital checks. But Drake has a plan; he'll force nature to cooperate with him.

To get his plan rolling, Drake needs seed money, so he wheedles millionaire playboy George Morton, heir to a forklift fortune, into donating \$10 million to NERF. But Morton has the audacity to withdraw his gift when a scientist at MIT apparently sets him straight about the science behind Drake's claims. Drake is livid. Shortly after Morton takes his money back, he crashes his Ferrari through an oceanside guard rail and plunges down a cliff to his presumed death. No body is found. Is this an accident or yet another murder?

That MIT scientist, a man named Kenner, ends up being a crucial actor in Mr. Crichton's

intricate plot. He is working on a hush-hush federal project and soon teams up with a blonde friend of Morton's, a naïve lawyer and an omniscient brunette to face down what looks like global catastrophe. Crumbling ice shelves in Antarctica, flash floods in the Arizona desert and a tsunami in the South Pacific -- are these disasters natural or are they man-made?

"State of Fear" is, in a sense, the novelization of a speech that Mr. Crichton delivered in September 2003 at San Francisco's Commonwealth Club. He argued there that environmentalism is essentially a religion, a belief-system based on faith, not fact. To make this point, the novel weaves real scientific data and all too real political machinations into the twists and turns of its gripping story.

For example, the climate computer models relied upon by global-warming proponents like Drake -- or, in real life, by John Adams (NRDC), Carl Pope (Sierra Club), Kevin Knobloch (Union of Concerned Scientists) and John Passacantando (Greenpeace USA) -- predict that such warming will be strongest at the earth's poles, turning glaciers into floods and raising sea levels. In "State of Fear," Drake warns that Greenland's ice cap is melting and will push the sea level up by 20 feet. (As it happens, on Wednesday of this week Sir David King, Tony Blair's chief scientific adviser, testified with similar alarm before a British legislative committee, saying: "If the ice-sheets in Greenland melt, sea levels would rise 6.5 metres and London would be underwater.")

Yet as Mr. Crichton has his scientist Kenner correctly note, Greenland's ice cap is in no imminent danger of melting away. It is well established scientifically that average temperatures in Greenland and Iceland have been falling at the rather steep rate of 2.2 degrees Celsius per decade since 1987. As for temperatures in most of Antarctica, they have been falling for nearly 50 years, and ice there has been accumulating rather than melting. And those sea levels? Nils-Axel Möörner, a professor of geodynamics at Stockholm University, has been studying the low-lying atolls of the Maldivian Islands in the Indian Ocean. He has found "a total absence of any recent sea level rise" and has instead found evidence of a fall in sea level in the past 20 years -- a fact that Mr. Crichton has the good instinct to report in the course of pushing his plot forward.

And what about the trend in actual global average temperatures, a question central to the debate in "State of Fear"? According to satellite data, since 1978 the planet has been warming up at a rate, per decade, of 0.08 degrees Celsius. Simple arithmetic reveals that, if the rate continues, the planet will warm by 0.8 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. That compares with an increase of 0.6 degrees Celsius during the 20th century. No catastrophe there. Indeed, Mr. Crichton has one of his characters note the costly uselessness of the supposedly heat-reducing Kyoto Protocols.

Such facts help to counter the conventional wisdom we hear every day in real life and, in "State of Fear," act as a plot-driving counterforce to Mr. Crichton's less-than-admirable activist characters. Along the way, Mr. Crichton makes vividly apparent how environmentalist misinformation costs lives and money. He has Kenner tell fatuous Hollywood environmentalist Ted Bradley (Martin Sheen?) that banning DDT was "arguably the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century." Why? Because DDT was the best defense against malaria-carrying mosquitoes. "All together, the ban has caused more than 50 million needless deaths," Kenner

says. "Banning DDT killed more people than Hitler, Ted. And the environmental movement pushed hard for it." True enough.

Mr. Crichton mentions the phony power-line cancer scare perpetrated in the New Yorker magazine by activist Paul Brodeur in the late 1980s, which cost the country billions of dollars by requiring power companies to bury lines needlessly and by pushing down property values for no reason at all, except, so to speak, religion. Drake is made to recite the alarming claim that 40,000 species are disappearing every year. In real life, that figure was ginned up in 1979 by Oxford University biologist Norman Myers, who declared in his book "The Sinking Ark" that the world could "lose one-quarter of all species by the year 2000."

Of course, that didn't happen. In 1994, the World Conservation Union found known extinctions since 1600 to include only 258 animal species, 368 insect species and 384 vascular plants. Since the establishment of an endangered species list in the 1960s, only seven species have been declared extinct in the U.S.: four freshwater fish, a freshwater clam and two small birds. We mourn for them all, of course, including the clam, but we mourn all the more for the people duped by appalling scare tactics like those of Mr. Myers. Mr. Crichton gets the scare-mongers exactly right throughout "State of Fear."

Not that Mr. Crichton is 100% accurate. Kenner tells Morton's friend: "Environmental groups in the U.S. generate half a billion dollars a year." The actual amount for just the 12 largest environmental lobby groups in the U.S. in 2003 was \$1.95 billion. That buys a lot of influence in the Washington. One way to mitigate its effect is to read "State of Fear" -- every bit as informative as it is entertaining. And it is very entertaining.

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*Mr. Bailey is Reason magazine's science correspondent and the author of the forthcoming "Liberation Biology: The Moral and Scientific Defense of the Biotech Revolution."*