

05/2008

Re: A Sputnik moment needed

Dear Editor,

There is an anti-science element in American discourse that threatens to make our country a second rate world power. Some 50% of us believe the world is around 10,000 years old. How big of an error is that? It's akin to believing that the distance from Los Angeles to New York is 30 feet. A few of us wonder how a "meager 0.038% CO₂" could have a significant effect on climate because air is 99.95% oxygen and nitrogen. Too bad these folks don't care to understand the physics of radiation forcing, because this is similar to doubting that 0.00001% lead (clinical symptoms of lead poisoning begin at these levels) in your body could have deleterious effects.

After the Russians launched Sputnik in 1959 this country made an enormous investment in science and technology. These United States invented the transistor, the laser, the computer, and countless other technological innovations. For Pete's sake, we put a man on the moon! The resulting income boon lasted throughout the last third of the 20th century and created a clearly superior U.S. standard of living.

We are now in danger of losing that position through our disdain and outright hostility to science. There is a reverse brain drain occurring in this country as researchers and students leave to go to various Southeast Asian and European economies where science and science education are respected, not labeled "elitist". Maybe it's time we start accepting results from science as opposed to naive myths and wishful thinking.

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