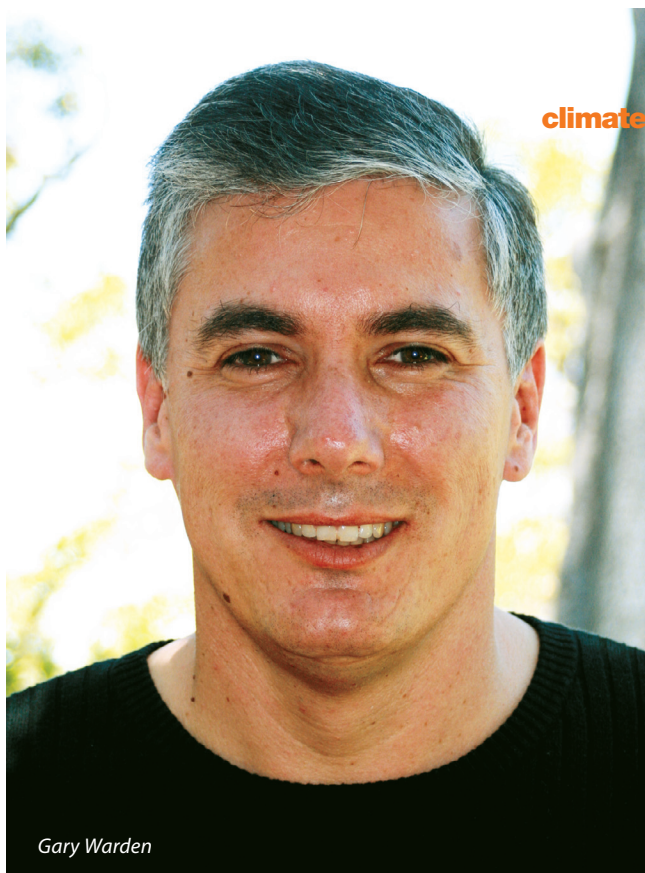


A Changed Outlook



Gary Warden

Former BHP Billiton executive Gary Warden describes himself as having once been a fully fledged anthropogenic climate change sceptic. After happening upon an article in 2006, however, he became convinced of the urgency of reducing greenhouse gas emissions; his self-described 'epiphany' sparked a chain of events that have resulted in Warden reassessing his priorities and making a number of far-reaching changes to his lifestyle.

"I was very strongly sceptical about climate change; I was convinced, having learnt about it as a geologist, that it was completely natural", Warden reflected.

"I certainly didn't believe it had anything to do with human activity or greenhouse gas emissions. I would argue until I was black and blue in the face with my wife about that, and she would constantly try to engage me in a conversation about it. Every time a new newspaper article would come out she'd try and slip it in front of my nose.

"Somehow or other I managed to avoid it for 10 years, and really avoided doing anything about it. I had a huge salary, a big lavish lifestyle; I calculated our ecological footprint the other day, just out of interest, and if everybody on the planet lived the way we did, we'd need 13 planets to sustain that!"

At a doctor's office in 2006 Warden picked up a magazine.

"I still don't really understand what caused me to pick the magazine up, but in the waiting room was a little coffee table, in the middle of the coffee table was this *TIME Magazine* with a picture of a polar bear on a rapidly melting iceberg, and the title of the magazine was, 'Be Worried. Be Very Worried.'"

"That was the first time in more than 20 years that I'd actually bothered to look at what the latest science was saying about climate change. There was information there that I thought, 'gee, that's pretty compelling'. It's pretty much hard to argue against some of those things that were being raised."

Warden describes it as a 'watershed' in terms of his level of understanding about climate change; he instantly made changes to his household and lifestyle.

"We made major changes, we slashed our electricity bill by about 90%; we ditched the big 4WD and got a much more fuel-efficient car."

He eventually left his role as Global Manager for BHP's business improvement program, and what began as a 'two-year sabbatical' has seen him dedicate himself to spreading climate change awareness. Warden is now Executive Director of Days Of Change, an organisation devoted to spreading worldwide understanding and preparedness to act on climate change.

In 2007 Warden was trained by Al Gore to deliver his climate change message to Western Australians, a program he describes as 'fantastic'.

"I think it helps educate people. And I really made sure that I localised it as much as possible, so I did a lot of research", he said. "I always felt that, for my own personal understanding and credibility, I needed to actually understand the science a lot more. So, I really took it upon myself to try and study the science."

Warden is also involved with a program called Living Smart—developed about six years ago by the City of Fremantle, the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council, the Learning Centre and Murdoch University—designed to train people to live more sustainably.

He said it gives people simple, practical advice.

"Our goal is to really just demonstrate how easy it is to make the change; you don't need to live in a mud-brick, thatched-roof house with no running water or electricity to make a real difference", he said. "Personally, I've slashed my transportation emissions by 99% and saved tens of thousands of dollars in the process."

Warden argues, while climate change does occur naturally, regardless of what human beings do, the science behind anthropogenic climate change cannot be ignored, with the IPCC and CSIRO able to fingerprint CO₂ emissions.

"What is unequivocal is that levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere have increased significantly in the last 150 years. Nobody would disagree with that. The disagreement comes in terms of the degree with which the increasing levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere then contribute towards increasing temperatures."

climate change

Warden said a whole range of factors contribute to climate change—including solar forcing, cosmic rays and cosmic flux—however argues that greenhouse gases are by far the biggest component in global warming.

“After you exclude all of those factors, you cannot explain the increased temperatures that we’ve seen since industrialisation without factoring in greenhouse gases, it just can’t be done. More importantly, since the 1970s when we’ve seen a fairly dramatic increase in temperatures, even despite this temporary cessation of that increasing trend, again you cannot explain that increasing trend without factoring in the greenhouse gases, in particular carbon dioxide.”

While he accepts there is always some room for doubt, Warden believes the weight of evidence should not be ignored.

“My view on that is that the IPCC in its estimation thinks it is primarily a result of greenhouse gases. The national science academies of all the G8 economies and other countries like China, Brazil, India, Australia all endorse the IPCC’s view, there’s a whole range of geological associations out there who all endorse the IPCC’s view, so I think on the balance of probabilities it is a wise decision for us to make as a society to say they’re probably right”, he said.

“Things like the melting of the Arctic sea ice, that’s tracking at or beyond what the projections were; the rise in sea levels are tracking at or beyond the worst case projections; the increasing rate of emissions is tracking at or beyond the worst case emissions scenario.

“My view is the whole IPCC process has actually ended up with very conservative projections. Most of the observed impacts of climate change are worse than what was actually predicted.”

Warden is dismissive of the views expressed by Professor Ian Plimer that scientists who speak out against climate change are effectively blacklisted and barred from government funding.

“My challenge to Plimer is really, if he believes what he’s put in his book, to actually put it in an article and then demonstrate that he gets rebuffed and doesn’t get accepted. I think it’s just inconceivable; it’s almost like he’s trying to say that there’s this group-think in the climate change world, that everybody’s aligned around this particular view.

“It completely ignores the whole process that’s gone on for the last 30 years. And so, while Plimer says we haven’t had the debate yet, the fact is the debate’s been going on in the scientific circles for 30 years.

“He might not have been involved, but there’s been geoscientists involved—there’s a whole chapter in the IPCC’s Fourth Assessment Report on paleoclimate. People have got bloodied in the debate; it has been a very difficult debate, even within the scientific circles”, he noted.

“I just cannot believe that there’s this sort of group-think that people are being shut down—I just don’t think that science happens like that. I think he’s underestimating and doing a disservice to the scientific process by saying those sorts of things. It’s an easy throwaway statement, looks good in print, but I don’t think he’s got any evidence that can justify a statement like that.”

Warden said Plimer’s comments likening the climate change movement to a ‘new religion’ are counterproductive.

“I think Ian Plimer needs to take a closer look at himself—along with other people who remain sceptical about climate change—in terms of are they really looking at the science, or are they really basing it on gut feeling and their own personal prejudices?”

“For him to be accusing the people who are concerned about climate change and do believe that it is predominately anthropogenic in nature, for him to be accusing them of being semi-religious or quasi-religious I think is offensive and he needs to look in the mirror.”

While he believes more needs to be done at a political level in Australia to address climate change, Warden said the very nature of the political system makes it difficult to implement immediate change, as evidenced by the difficult passage of the emissions trading legislation.

“The Labor Party is basically playing a very careful political game. They’re trying to appease everybody. And you can be critical of that, but at the end of the day that is the reality. They arguably need to appease everybody in order to actually get this legislation through.”

Warden, however, said he believes a will does exist within both politics and industry to implement change.

“I think this is one of the mistruths that gets put out there, and I won’t name names, but there’s people in the industry, in representative groups, industry groups, who are out there spreading

mistruths about the implications of an emissions trading scheme or doing something about reducing carbon emissions”, he said.

“I just don’t buy into the fact that necessarily doing something about climate change is going to actually impact most of the resource companies. Most of the resource companies actually have pretty small carbon footprints. Even if you put a price on carbon, the cost of that compared to their revenue, or their profits, is miniscule, very insignificant. That’s going to have no impact on those businesses.”

Warden said he sees LNG as an important ‘transitional’ energy source to a low carbon economy and said energy companies must also look to renewable energies.

“There’s lots of resource companies with deep pockets. Personally, if I was a company in the resource industry and in the energy game, I’d be looking seriously at buying one of the small renewable energy players; you may not have the expertise in renewables, but you’re an expert in energy production.

“I think we’ll see more renewable technologies being developed. If that means that then fossil fuels become a smaller percentage of the overall energy sector, then that’s the way it’s got to be. It doesn’t mean that businesses are going to become unprofitable or go out of business overnight. I just don’t think that will happen.”

Regardless of whether the world comes to an agreement at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, Warden said Australia should be at the forefront of climate change mitigation efforts. He believes the potential consequences of climate change far outweigh the risk of doing nothing.

“There’s no doubt if the IPCC are wrong and we take action now, then, yes, there’s going to be some cost implications resulting from transitioning to a low carbon economy, arguably for no reason. But, on the upside, I’d argue that actually there’s lots of other added benefits to the transition to a low carbon economy, because ultimately we’ll have cleaner motor vehicles and less pollution from that.

“We are either at or fast approaching peak oil. That is a limited resource anyway, so that will force us to move at some stage to low carbon technologies. I think the potential downside of us acting now and being wrong—that small probability that we’re wrong—versus the enormous potential downside if we fail to take action and the projections prove correct, mean it is simply not worth the risk of doing nothing, as Ian Plimer would suggest.” ■