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SPIEGEL INTERVIEW WITH CLIMATOLOGIST HANS VON STORCH

"We Have to Take Away People's Fear of Climate Change"

Hans von Storch is one of Germany's leading researchers on climate change. DER SPIEGEL spoke with him about why fears of global warming are exaggerated and the doom-mongering tendencies of German scientists.



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A young woman in the southern German town of Freiburg enjoys this week's unusually warm weather. Will climate change bring more benefits than drawbacks to Germany?

SPIEGEL: Mr. Storch, will you cancel your next long-distance flight to save the climate?

Storch: No, I already have a number of overseas business trips scheduled for this year. But I do spend my summer vacations in nearby Denmark -- not for moral reasons, but because I own a vacation house there.

SPIEGEL: Some climate protection groups and politicians are calling on Germans to spend their summer vacations in their own country in the future.

Storch: That's just another one of those typically German attempts to save the world with symbolic acts. It makes us feel like better people and morally superior to everyone else.

SPIEGEL: What's wrong with reducing CO2 emissions?

Storch: It is in fact necessary to reduce CO2 emissions. There is no reason why we shouldn't spend our vacations on (the North Sea island of) Sylt instead of in the Seychelles, or drive more economical cars -- for

the sake of preserving increasingly scarce resources if nothing else. But that won't enable us to stop climate change. As long as China, India and the United States continue the way they have been, what we Germans do is more or less irrelevant.

FROM THE MAGAZINE



SPIEGEL: Is it even possible to prevent global warming at this point?

Storch: No. Because of the inherent time lag in the climate system, the greenhouse gases that have already been pumped into the atmosphere will undoubtedly lead to a certain increase in temperature in the coming decades. We can no longer completely avoid anthropogenic climate change. At best, limiting the temperature rise to two degrees is just about possible, according to optimistic estimates. That's why we should spend more time talking about adjusting to the inevitable and not about reducing CO2 emissions. We have to take away people's fear of climate change.

SPIEGEL: But many believe that the end of the world is upon us. Is the climate debate gradually becoming too hysterical?

Storch: Indeed. The fear of climatic catastrophes is an ancient one and not unlike our fear of strangers. In the past, people believed that the climate almost always changes for the worse, and only rarely for the better -- God's punishment for sinful behavior. And nowadays it's those hedonistic wastrels who pollute the air so that they can look at some pretty fish in the South Seas. It would be better if we only ever rode bikes. Oh, there's always someone wagging a finger in disapproval.

ABOUT HANS VON STORCH

SPIEGEL: Are there only negative consequences when the temperature increases by two or three degrees on the planet?

Storch: Detailed forecasts are not possible, because we don't know how emissions will in fact develop. We climate researchers can only offer possible scenarios. In other words, things could end up being completely different. But there are undoubtedly parts of the world that will benefit on balance from climate change. Those areas tend to be in the north, where it has been cold and uncomfortable in the past. But it's considered practically heretical to even raise such issues.



Timo Jann

Hans von Storch, 57, is the director of the GKSS Institute for Coastal Research in Geesthacht, Germany. A mathematician and meteorologist, Storch is one of the world's leading climate experts and has been involved in evaluating computer models of global warming.

SPIEGEL: What would be the consequences for Germany, for example?

Storch: Very mixed. We will probably see higher storm tides. As a result, we won't be able to avoid building higher dikes. But our hydraulic engineers have already done a good job controlling the higher storm tides in Hamburg, for example, which we brought on ourselves by narrowing the Elbe River. At the same time, increased precipitation in the winter will force us to improve drainage on fields and meadows. On the other hand, milder temperatures will certainly boost tourism, especially along the North Sea and the Baltic Sea.

SPIEGEL: And what about the monster storms that will supposedly be rushing in our direction in a greenhouse climate?

Storch: A false alarm, so far, even though it's become warmer by almost one degree since the beginning of industrialization. According to the computer models, we do expect high winds in northern Germany to increase by one percent per decade. But this is such a weak

phenomenon that we won't even notice it at first.

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SPIEGEL: And the thousands of heat-related deaths the Kiel Institute for World Economics predicted in a recent study?

Storch: Such claims are completely idiotic and dubious. What they did was to simply perform an extrapolation based on the mortality rate during the exceptionally hot 2003 summer, which took everyone by surprise and for which we were therefore completely unprepared. But if higher summer temperatures become the norm in the future, people will adjust. Perhaps they'll take naps more frequently in the afternoon and convert their houses accordingly. The good thing is that all of these changes will not happen overnight, but in the space of decades. We still have enough time to react.

SPIEGEL: Why is it such a taboo to ask about the positive effects of climate change?

Storch: The reasons are likely rooted in religion. Playing around with God's creation is simply not allowed. Incidentally, in the past it was precisely the deeply religious people who said: Of course we're playing with God's creation, in fact we're perfecting it. This sort of thinking is frowned upon today.

SPIEGEL: Aren't climate researchers helping fuel a state of panic with their generally bleak warnings?

Storch: Unfortunately many scientists see themselves too much as priests whose job it is to preach moralistic sermons to people. This is another legacy of the 1968 generation, which I happen to belong to myself. In fact, it would be better if we just presented the facts and scenarios dispassionately -- and then society can decide for itself what it wants to do to influence climate change.

Interview conducted by Olaf Stampf

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