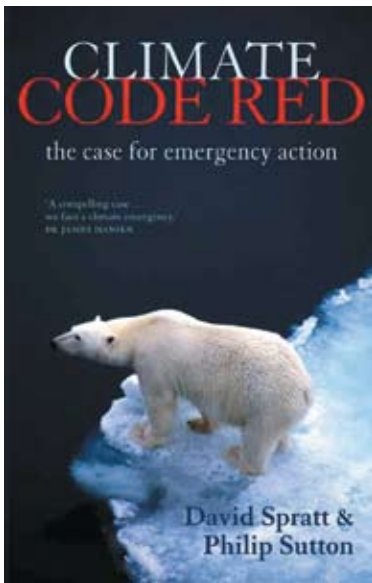


# AJEM BOOK REVIEW



## **Climate Code Red: the Case for Emergency Action**

Reviewed by: Chas Keys

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Philip Sutton

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The field of climate change, of late, has become a thicket of sharply opposing positions. Things have reached a point at which many people, emergency managers among them, have become highly confused as to what they should believe about something that might be just about the most serious emergency imaginable. The debate between the so-called 'climate change sceptics' and those who accept that climate change is real, important and to a significant degree humanly-induced is not merely complicated: in many instances it has become poisonous. At times the debate has degenerated into name-calling and other forms of personal denigration as the two sides accuse each other of dishonesty in their dealings with the science.

Which side of the fence the authors of Climate Code Red occupy in this argument is unambiguous. Spratt (a Melbourne businessman)

and Sutton (an advisor to several Australian governments on sustainability issues) believe that the world's climate is changing, and dangerously, that the trend is very much due to human activity, and that we have already gone too far in increasing the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and warming our planet. Their position is stated without seeking to denigrate (or indeed to counter) other opinions, and they develop a prescription for the solution of a problem which they describe as being truly of massive scale and consequence. The book's thesis is alarming, but its tone is sober and it is well documented. It begins with the empirical science, describing in detail the complex, feedback-rich processes involved in environmental change and concluding that the situation with regard to the summer melting of the Arctic sea-ice and the rise in sea levels is actually worse than the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – a forum whose methods and conclusions are often derided by the sceptics has so far forecast. The conclusions are drawn that the pace of climate change is actually increasing, and that there is a real danger of 'run-on warming' that is, warming that is beyond human control if we do not quickly and effectively tackle the problem.

The book looks also at management that is, at what has been done so far to arrest the problem. It concludes that the answer is 'nowhere near enough'. The argument is put that most of the approaches that are currently being considered or are in the early stages of implementation ('clean' coal, carbon offsets and carbon trading schemes, for example) are ineffectual at best and, in practice, open to rorting and devious practice generally. One is left with the impression that current political mechanisms are simply incapable of dealing with the scale and urgency of the problem. 'Politics as usual' simply will not do the job, because it is geared to compromise and not to the radical

action which the authors believe is urgently necessary if the planet is to escape disaster. Australia's enormous dependence on coal, both for power generation and export earnings, is a serious impediment to our making a strong effort: it means that there are strong lobbying interests in favour of fossil fuels, leading to governmental timidity in the adoption of emissions trading schemes. Spratt and Sutton argue for nothing less than a truly radical approach to the problem. Governments must switch quickly to emergency mode, they say, treating climate change as they would a problem of the scale of a world war. World War II saw several nations switch their economies rapidly to the point that expenditures on military outlays (as percentages of national incomes) reached or exceeded 50% and that from a base in some instances of less than 10% before 1939. An equivalent effort, it is argued, will be required to cut emissions quickly to zero (not by a certain percentage over the next few decades) and to radically reduce the processes responsible for warming. In essence this would mean a rapid shift towards renewable energy, the removal of fossil fuels from the transport sector, a rethinking of our methods of manufacturing, much more recycling, and many other things.

In 2009, as nations hesitantly debate the adoption of emissions trading schemes that may not halt the trend towards increasing the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, such radical action seems far away. We had better hope that the future described by Spratt and Sutton is in error: if it is not, climate change will amount not simply to more frequent severe floods, increased risks of bush fire and more intense droughts, but to mass extinctions of species and the decline of the 'habitability' of the planet from a human point of view.

This is, to say the least, a challenging book. It is also genuinely frightening.