

Scientist Explains Earth's Warming Plateau

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All Things Considered

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Research shows that over the past several years, Earth's temperature has not been heating up. Climate change skeptics claim this as evidence that global warming is overexaggerated. But the man who did the research, climate and ocean scientist Mojib Latif, says "not so fast." Latif talks to host Guy Raz about the Earth's temperature plateau and what it means for global warming.

GUY RAZ, host:

But a best-case scenario? Well, if you read the research done by Professor Mojib Latif, a climate-change researcher at Kiel University in Germany, you might conclude that the Earth is actually cooling, and in fact, many climate change skeptics have, and they've cited Latif's research as evidence, except that Latif says his study has been misinterpreted and that global warming is just temporarily on hold.

Dr. MOJIB LATIF (Climate and Ocean Scientist, University of Kiel): What we are experiencing is a kind of hold; temperatures are more or less steady and remain at relatively high levels. The last record was in 1998.

RAZ: So we're not getting hotter from 1998 right now.

Dr. LATIF: We are not getting hotter but not colder either, and so, you know, the situation is more or less steady, but this is nothing unusual.

RAZ: What is causing this? Why hasn't there been an increase in the Earth's temperature since 1998?

Dr. LATIF: Well, we believe that a change in ocean current, especially in the tropical Pacific and in the southern oceans on the Southern Hemisphere, cooled the sea surface temperature, and this then led to an offset, you know, to global warming, and so the net effect is basically that there was no additional change.

RAZ: So based on your research, if I have this right, climate change, particularly a warming of the Earth's climate, is still the trend. It's just been slowed down for the last few years because of ocean currents, changes in ocean currents.

Dr. LATIF: Exactly. So - and this is the reason, because we have the short-term climate fluctuation, therefore, it doesn't make sense to look at short periods to assess the human impact on climate. So you have to consider several decades. Only then you see basically the long-term warming trend, and therefore, we can't really draw any inferences from this hold in the last 10 years or so, you know, with regard to global warming.

RAZ: So when do you expect the Earth to start warming again at an accelerated rate, what year?

Dr. LATIF: Well, we did only forecasts for the time until 2015. However, if we look further, then we have some indications that there are after, say after 2015 or 2020, you know, global warming will accelerate again.

RAZ: And how much warmer do you estimate it will become over the next sort of two or three decades?

Dr. LATIF: I think maybe .2 or .3 degrees, but it may accelerate thereafter. So it basically depends on, you know, how we behave during the next decades, right? So if we emit - or if we continue to emit these greenhouse gases at the present rate, you know, then the warming trend will be faster.

RAZ: Now, your research, Dr. Latif, has been cited by climate change skeptics here in the U.S., by for example, George Will, a conservative columnist with the Washington Post, to show that the Earth actually goes through natural warming and cooling trends and that climate change is really being overhyped. Do you think your work is being misused?

Dr. LATIF: Yes. It is misused. I must say this, unfortunately, because these changes we are talking about, these short-term changes, you know, their amplitudes are much smaller than the long-term warming trends. So we are talking about a hold, okay, in the last 10 years. We are not talking about a net cooling to, say, (unintelligible) temperatures, (unintelligible), you know, which we observed 100 years ago or so. Okay, and also what we predicted for the future is basically that this hold may continue for another 10 years or so, okay, but we did not predict a cooling. We basically said that we would stay for some more years on this plateau.

RAZ: Just to clarify, you are not a climate change skeptic.

Dr. LATIF: If my name was not Mojib Latif, my name would be global warming. So I really believe in Global Warming. Okay. However, you know, we have to accept that there are these natural fluctuations, and therefore, the temperature may not show additional warming temporarily.

RAZ: That is Mojib Latif, also known as Global Warming. He's a professor for climate physics at the Leibniz Institute of Marine Sciences at Kiel University. He spoke with me from Hamburg, Germany.

Mojib Latif, thank you so much.

Dr. LATIF: I thank you.

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