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EDITORIAL OBSERVER

A Film That Could Warm Up the Debate on Global Warming

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Even as a summer disaster film, "[The Day After Tomorrow](#)" does not rank with the greats of yesteryear. Its dialogue is overwrought, its symbolism sophomoric, its subplots annoyingly irrelevant and its relationship to scientific reality tenuous at best.

But the special effects are terrific, and the timing couldn't be better. Scientists, environmentalists and a few lonely politicians have been trying without great success to get the public and the Bush administration to take global warming seriously, and to inject the issue into a presidential campaign that so far seems determined to ignore it.

Whatever its flaws, "The Day After Tomorrow" could do more to elevate the issue than any number of Congressional hearings or high-minded tracts. That's one reason the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan was happy to present the premiere in a theater not far from its Hall of Biodiversity, biodiversity being one of global warming's most likely victims. It's also a reason why mainstream environmental groups have rushed to offer sage commentary on what, after all, is just a mindless summer blockbuster. One group, the Worldwatch Institute, goes so far as to offer on its Web site energy-saving tips on how to ensure "a better day after tomorrow." It exhorts the 20 million Americans the producers hope to draw to the movie to install more efficient shower heads to cut down on hot water use, and to ride bikes to the theater instead of driving.

Senator John McCain is among the believers, expressing the hope that the film may win a few more votes for a bill he's co-sponsoring with Senator Joseph Lieberman. That bill would slowly begin to reduce industrial carbon-dioxide emissions, which are a huge part of the problem. Despite its over-the-top story, the film does leave you with the unnerving feeling that the natural world deserves far more respect than we and our leaders are giving it. "We'll take all the help we can get," said Mr. McCain, who got 43 votes for his bill the last time around. He plans to bring it back to the Senate floor before Congress's July 4 recess.

The movie, which opens this weekend, revolves around a scientist named Jack Hall, played with tortured earnestness by Dennis Quaid. Hall's obsessions with climate change have not only busted up a perfectly good marriage but made him a complete pain in the neck to a complacent White House. The real power in this White House is not the well-meaning but vacant president, but a reactionary vice president who is meant, unmistakably, to be Dick Cheney and is played that way by Kenneth Welsh. While Hall keeps warning of disaster, Welsh/Cheney keeps whining that doing anything meaningful — ratifying the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, for instance — will bankrupt the economy.

Hall, of course, is right. Before you know it, all hell breaks loose: The polar ice cap splinters, hailstones flatten Tokyo, and tornadoes level Los Angeles. All that is merely a prelude to the Big One, namely the complete devastation of New York City, first by a huge tidal wave, then by an ice storm that flash-freezes everyone and everything in sight, except the wolves in the Bronx Zoo.

As for the underlying science, the movie rests on the respectable theory that at some point, the melting of the ice sheets in Antarctica or Greenland, or both, could disrupt important oceanic currents that act as

heat-carrying conveyor belts, like the Gulf Stream, and in so doing trigger a sharp drop in temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere.

But most experts believe that a sudden switch from gradual climate change to an instantaneous hemispheric deep freeze, like the one portrayed in the movie, is all but impossible. If the currents did shut down, a more likely result would be a temperature drop of 10 or so degrees, limited mainly to northern Europe.

Moreover, the film offers viewers who come to it with little knowledge of the subject almost no enlightenment on the underlying causes of global warming. The role of all those S.U.V.'s owned by Hollywood celebrities, for instance, is nowhere mentioned. There is even less on what might be done about it, beyond getting rid of dunderheads like Welsh/Cheney. "If you are expecting this film to educate you on global warming, forget about it," said Michael Oppenheimer, an adviser to Environmental Defense and a Princeton professor whose studies on warming helped put the issue on the map. On the other hand, he adds, the movie may well cause people to start paying attention to the realities of the issue, which "are plenty bad enough."

Moviegoers who find themselves inspired to learn more will benefit from a new book called "Red Sky at Morning" by James Gustave Speth, dean of the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale. The book, an overview of environmental threats, provides a list of the already observable consequences of warming — coral bleaching, the gradual loss of coastal salt marshes and wetlands, melting permafrost, vanishing glaciers — as well as a forecast of even greater calamities, like drought, deforestation and even widespread starvation if nothing is done to arrest the buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

To bring matters back to New York, Dr. Oppenheimer's calculations suggest that business-as-usual will mean the certain loss of every beach in the metropolitan area by the end of the century and — should one or the other of the big ice sheets in western Antarctica or Greenland begin to go — the inundation of much of Lower Manhattan as well. This isn't the frightening event portrayed in "The Day After Tomorrow." It's slower and stealthier, though no less dangerous to global stability. Dr. Oppenheimer observes that "the future is still in our hands." That's fine, as long as someone in authority grabs hold of it, which the real-life Bush administration seems no more disposed to do than the movie version.