

BOOK REVIEW

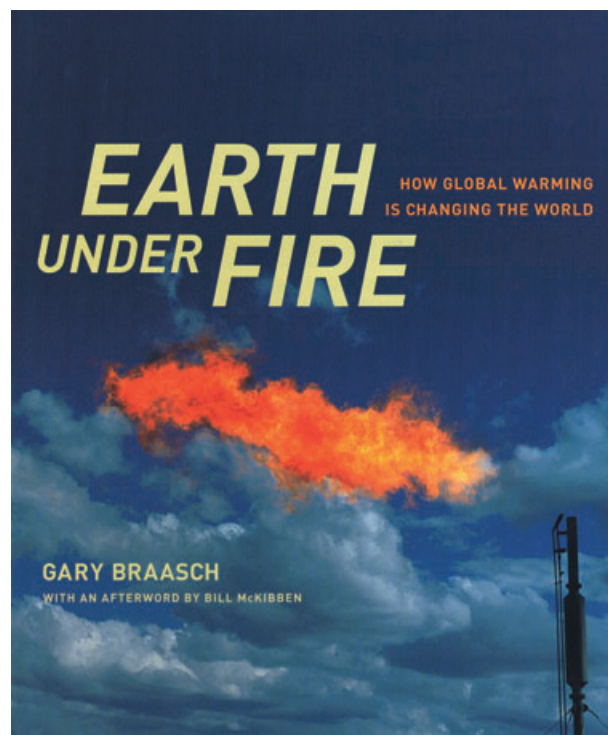
Review of *Earth under fire: how global warming is changing the world*, by Gary Braasch (2007). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 270 pp. ISBN 0520244389.

Earth under fire claims to be a photographic journal of the author's voyage to document past and current climate change. This would be no bad thing from a photographer capable of both beautiful and informative photography. In fact, though, only the preface contains many photographs; the rest of the book gradually becomes a literature review, with the last two of five chapters concerning the future, and parts of the book have been written by others. This makes it more of an intermediate scientific review than was probably intended.

The first chapter compares photographs of glaciers taken by the author with photographs taken decades earlier from the same vantage point. Despite the lack of dates on these, the presence of roads and dams in previously glaciated areas usually proves the point. The book then moves on to discuss warming in the polar regions, covering disintegrating ice shelves and Inuit accounts, and thankfully omits pictures of houses sinking in permafrost. Next comes the impacts on flora and fauna. It is hard not to think that the author is being selective here, as others have been, but the sheer quantity of examples is quite suggestive. The fourth chapter focuses on the future: the examples of shore erosion and the like may come from the present, but the discussion is clearly about what is going to happen. Finally, the book ends with a discussion of what can, and should, be done to avoid things getting really bad. Despite clearly being quite passionate about climate change, the author has been impressively objective until this chapter. Here, though, transporting food across oceans is labelled as bad, whereas organic food is labelled as good, even if it means more has to be transported from elsewhere; cities are unfairly cast in a bad light, whereas Europe, with all of its urban areas, is cast in a greener light than it probably should. Interspersed in all of these chapters are short essays by very eminent scholars. Unfortunately, the main text is so exhaustive that it largely makes these essays redundant.

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This book is not the summary of climate change that it claims to be: the text is far too long for that. The author has done some pretty extensive reading through the scientific literature, though, and by and large the interpretation is pretty accurate. This is not a picture book for the environmental coffee table. It could, however, be a book for the educated layman who wants an accurate review of the state of climate change that is rather more readable than intergovernmental reports. In that sense, two aspects of the book are worth noting. First, despite drifting a bit, the book does focus on what matters to people: the recent past, present, and the near-future, rather than looking at some hypothetical stabilization emissions scenario that is centuries away. Second, there is no explanation of the greenhouse effect or of climate models. This omission of climate physics is not missed, indicating just how much the problem has moved on. It also indicates, however, the way in which physicists have taken themselves out of the picture by not evolving with the problem.

