THE FEARFUL PRACTICE OF TREATING GLOBAL WARMING AS FICTION:

In late December, I resolved to read Michael Crichton's new novel, "State of Fear," which suggests that global warming is little more than hot air. By mid-January, I skipped my resolution, having leafed through the book, read a few reviews and monitored www.realclimate.org for scientific reactions.

Crichton is correct about many things. But he's dangerously wrong in his double-edged thesis that everything will be globally groovy a century from now and that environmentalists are alarmists prone to conspiracy.

Such a shame! Crichton wrote previous novels that I've really enjoyed. "The Andromeda Strain," about global epidemics, was fiction. "Jurassic Park," about a dinosaur theme park, was fiction. "State of Fear" is also fiction. His title for the last book may describe the condition of a few Green Party zealots, but it doesn't describe better-informed, data-driven, careful-what-you-say natural scientists around the globe.

Crichton correctly highlights that eco-hysteria is always counterproductive; evidence, rather than emotion, must guide management decisions. But history shows that those who are unprepared for what surely must come will have the most difficulty adjusting to it. (Consider the Sumatran tsunami.) For every fiction writer who suggests that we relax about global change, there is at least one nonfiction writer with more relevant experience suggesting we heed the warning signs.

Consider the book "Red Sky at Morning" by J. Gustave Speth, dean of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies -- hardly a bastion of eco-hysteria. This book, which takes its title from the ancient sailor's warning, carefully documents what went right and wrong with environmental policy during the last 50 years and how to plan for the future.

Global warming may or may not be a local problem for you, depending on whether you prefer polar bears or coconuts, Jack London or Ernest Hemmingway, parched landscapes or verdant ones. But it's everyone's problem that the global community isn't prepared for the economic, ecological and cultural adjustments necessary to live in a warmer, fast-changing world.

Frankly, I'm happy to have been born in this interglacial phase, rather than the preceding glacial one, when an icy crepe smothered most of Canada and the northern United States. I'm even happier not to have lived through the transition from glacial to interglacial 12,000 years ago, when ecosystems were under the most stress. Unfortunately, we are living through another transition today that will likely bring more pain than pleasure, and probably a few climate surprises.

For a quick review of what's to come, the National Research Council recommends "Climate Change Impacts on the United States," published by the U.S. Global Change Research Program (www.usgcrp.gov/ usgcrp). This is no deep ecology group promulgating scare tactics, nor a propaganda machine for the energy industry working with the Bush administration. Rather, it's a credible, nonpartisan report on the changes predicted for the next century, assuming realistic scenarios.

Key findings include:

On average, the nation will warm 5 to 9 degrees Fahrenheit by 2100.
Regional variations in climate change will be very uneven. New England will have warmer daily lows in winter and more blazing hot days in summer. There will also be cloudier, wetter weather, probably with more extreme precipitation events.

Ecological adjustments will be dramatic. For example, sugar maples, wild brook trout and opossums will migrate northward.

Water concerns, such as droughts, floods and snow-pack changes, will challenge every region, even the Northeast.

The food supply is secure.

Forest growth will likely increase in a carbon dioxide-enriched atmosphere, at least in the short term.

Low-lying coastal areas will be adversely impacted.

Climate change will magnify other stresses, notably air and water pollution and threats to coral reefs.

Resolve to skip Crichton's newest novel. But if you fail to keep that resolve, keep in mind that this author's fiction is far more exaggerated than the nonfiction he writes about.