

The New Zealand Herald

Tuesday May 04, 2004

By GEOFFREY LEAN

Global warming could soon make Antarctica the only place to live, says chief British scientist

Antarctica is likely to be the world's only habitable continent by the end of this century if global warming remains unchecked, the British government's chief scientist, Professor Sir David King, said last week.

He said that the Earth was entering the "first hot period" since 60 million years ago, when there was no ice on the planet and "the rest of the globe could not sustain human life".

The shock warning -- one of the starkest yet delivered by a top scientist or senior government figure -- comes as British ministers are deciding whether to weaken measures next week to cut the pollution that causes climate change.

That is despite Tony Blair last week describing the situation as "very, very critical indeed".

The Prime Minister - who was launching a new alliance of governments, businesses and pressure groups to tackle global warming - added that he could not think of "any bigger long-term question facing the world community". Yet the Government is considering relaxing limits on emissions by industry under an EU scheme on Tuesday.

Sir David says that there is "plenty of evidence" to back up his warning. Levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere -- the main "green-house gas" causing climate change -- were already 50 per cent higher than at any time in the last 420,000 years. The last time they were at this level -- 379 parts per million and rising -- was 60 million years ago during a rapid period of global warming in the Palaeocene epoch, he said. Levels soared to 1,000 parts per million, causing a massive reduction of life on earth.

"No ice was left on earth. Antarctica was the best place for mammals to live, and the rest of the world would not sustain human life," he said.

Sir David warned that if the world did not curb its burning of fossil fuels "we will reach that level by the end of the century".