Title? – Winning arguments: coexistence not competition

I’m glad that Saul and his co-authors (SSY) found my comments provocative, since that was my main intention, and I’m sympathetic to their misgivings, since I’ve shared them myself in the past – but there is a clear sense in which they do precisely what I cautioned against doing: arguing that we should try that little bit harder, and with that little bit more patience, to explain the facts, and telling ourselves that if we keep faith in our ability to convey the truth, and in the ability of others to understand it, all will be right in the end. Of course, simply re-stating my contention doesn’t take us very far forward, so I’ll make two brief points.

First, SSY raise the issue of scientists – experts – behaving in a high-handed and patronizing way and presuming that we can do the public’s thinking for them. Put in these terms, such an attitude is difficult to defend, and it would indeed be indefensible if adopted in response to – or anticipation of – evidence-based arguments from those we wish to counter. But when there is time for nothing much more than a sound bite, and when it’s the sound bites of others that we need to counter, my contention, simply, is that it’s better to beat our opponents at their own game than to allow our perceived maintenance of integrity to trump everything else. A short appealing message from an expert, without the chapter and verse that underpins it, is inevitably, in a sense, a manipulation – saying “Trust me, I’m an expert”. But in circumstances where this amounts to saying “Trust me, I’m an expert, rather than what you’ve just heard from someone who lacks my expertise”, then I would have no compunction.

Second, and related to this, I tried to stress that my advice to concentrate on metaphors and sound-bites applied in some arenas but not others. When we are interacting with groups or individuals who have indicated their interest and a willingness to be engaged, of course it is right to behave as SSY advocate. This could be government ministers or groups of concerned citizens. I accept unreservedly their right to be involved in decision making – grounded either in the democratic process or simply natural justice – and that any decisions that are made must be based on a broader range of considerations than the purely ecological. I said as much in my original comment. Where I part company with SSY is the implication in what they say that this should always be our approach. I see no reason why the approaches that SSY and I advocate cannot coexist.