

I hope everyone had a happy Christmas and is looking forward to the New Year. According to figures produced by the Met Office, 2011 has been the second warmest year on record.

December, however, has been close to average in temperature. That kind of environmental news story is grist to the mill of climate change scientists; however, those kinds of broad brush strokes are difficult to swallow when, for instance, temperatures last week here in the North West hit double figures, while August saw this writer reverting to his winter coat to carry out some work outside.

Despite those regional and even local variations, the [Met Office](#) reports that the mean temperature so far this December has been 4.7°C – 0.5 °C above the 1971-2000 average. This is a big swing from last year, when temperatures were 5°C below average to notch up the coldest December on record.

A consistent move towards a warmer climate is what most would expect, although any environmental news source will point out that the process is not that smooth.

John Prior, national climate manager at the Met Office, said: "While it may have felt mild for many so far this December, temperatures overall have been close to what we would expect. "It may be that the stark change from last year, which was the coldest December on record for the UK, has led many to think it has been unseasonably warm."

This old cynic, however, wants to know when records started, as I can certainly remember consistently colder winters than last year, with snow on the ground for long periods.

That, of course, was in t'North, where we are more used to the cold – or are we? Other research published by the Met Office reports work undertaken jointly with Open Air Laboratories (OPAL), which voices the heresy that "the stereotype of the cold-hardy northerner and the southern-softy may be no more than a myth".

The report, quotes Mark McCarthy, a climate scientist at the Met Office. He said: "This research questions our stereotypes about how we feel temperatures. It has long been known that people can acclimatise to their environment, so we might expect people in the cooler north to feel the cold less than people in the south. Initial results suggest this might not be the case, however, and we all feel temperatures in the same way.

"What is really interesting is that these early results suggest it may be more appropriate to say people in the north and in rural areas are more pragmatic as they're more likely to reach for a coat when it gets colder than city-dwellers and those in the south."

That piece of news about how we perceive our environment actually bears out two pieces of

homespun wisdom long known to me. It was always said that the weather in the Pennine valleys was “an overcoat colder” than down on the flood plain, while the Scottish saying states that there is no such thing as bad weather – only the wrong clothing.

Having said that, football supporters in the North East are known to shed outer garments on the coldest days. It is known, however, that this kind of “paradoxical undressing” can immediately precede death from hypothermia as the brain fails to detect the difference between warm and cold.

The Met Office/OPAL survey is continuing throughout the winter. A pdf survey card to take part can be downloaded from [www.opalexplornature.org](http://www.opalexplornature.org) , at the Natural History Museum website.

For more climate change news see the section on this site’s environmental directory. See you in 2011.