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A lost generation: No progress on reducing climate change

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Twenty years ago, in a flush of enthusiasm at the end of the cold war, participants at a United Nations conference in Rio forged the Convention on Climate Change to protect the Earth. This led to the Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Unfortunately the U.S. Congress refused to sign this protocol, and it proved ineffective.

Meetings and scientific reports have followed every few years, with many declarations of intent — but no progress on binding international agreements. Global fossil fuel use has continued to rise. The follow-up meeting this month in Rio, called Rio+20, is promising far less.

Many governments have tried to direct investment towards developing and implementing renewable energy technologies to speed the transition away from fossil fuels as our primary energy source. Vermont is moving along this path. But political opposition to this energy transition has been rising, as those who maintain that climate change isn't for real have started to campaign against renewable energy as well.

There are two key issues here: One is financial and economic; the other is ideological. We have long subsidized the fossil fuel and nuclear industries. Now it would be smart to withdraw those subsidies and subsidize renewable energy instead. But the fossil fuel reserves are worth tens of trillions of dollars, and the industries involved are fighting to keep their subsidies. Our political system has become very costly, and consequently many politicians rely on kickbacks from wealthy industries for reelection. This means that companies can buy votes in Congress.

Many argue that without subsidies renewable energy is not yet competitive with fossil fuels. On the surface this is true. But fossil fuels only appear cheap because their extraordinary costs are being deferred to our children's lifetime. Worse still, these costs — climate change, weather extremes and species lost forever — cannot simply be paid off by our children in depreciated dollars. These are accumulative, long-term costs that for the most part cannot be mitigated.

The second ideological thread is a recent development. Twenty years ago the Republican governments of Ronald Reagan and George H. Bush pushed through the Montreal Protocol to protect the ozone layer and the Clean Air Act Amendments to reduce air pollution, despite industry opposition. They accepted the science and were proved right: Global regulation of gases that destroy ozone in the stratosphere was essential to save the Earth from an ozone catastrophe. They also understood the key role of the Environmental Protection Agency in regulating harmful air pollution from coal-fired power plants. And this awareness led to the reductions in harmful acid rain that was drifting eastward from these Midwestern power plants and affecting lakes and forests in the Northeast. They recognized that this was our common interest — to regulate human impacts on the Earth before they become too damaging.

We still face the same challenge. How do we balance the common interest against corporate profits and individual rights and freedoms? Our challenge is actually much broader — we must reconcile human interests with the preservation of the Earth's climate and its ecosystems, on which we are so dependent. Unfortunately, our collective awareness of these common interests seems to be slipping away, as society disintegrates into polarized groups, each convinced of different realities. The Internet has made it so easy to spread disinformation and cultivate different fantasy worlds.

Meanwhile summer is here. In the Arctic the sea ice is melting rapidly, and sea levels are rising as the Greenland ice cap melts. Our politicians may have buried their heads in campaign sands, but the Earth will have the last word.

Rio+20 Conference: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/>