

Today is a day of climate action around the world

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From a climate perspective, this year has toppled many records. Global temperatures for January to August set a new record high, and ten states in the eastern United States reported the hottest summer on record. It was far worse elsewhere on Earth. In Pakistan, extreme temperatures of 129 degrees were followed by the worst monsoon floods in living memory. Moscow experienced 99-degree temperatures for the first time, with devastating forest and peat fires that produced dense smog and dangerous levels of carbon monoxide. Up north in Canada large regions have been 5 degrees warmer than normal this year. Again the thinning Arctic ice cap had melted substantially by September.

Year-to-year and place-to-place variations are of course large — but on the long timescale of the Earth, the trend to a warming planet is unmistakable. It is almost certain that none of these extremes would have happened if atmospheric CO₂ had remained at its preindustrial level of 280 parts per million (ppm), rather than the 390 ppm it has now reached.

A few years ago, a group of students started meeting at Middlebury College on Sunday evenings to talk and dream about action on climate change. They assumed that government action by aging politicians was so remote that it would be too late to be of value to the Earth — and they knew that they would inherit and be responsible for cleaning up the Earth. One offshoot of this group, inspired by Bill McKibben, was a series of campaigns, starting in Vermont, and culminating in 350.org, which mobilized the first International Day of Climate Action a year ago this month in 181 countries.

Last December this group took their campaign to the UN climate conference in Copenhagen. They were stunned but delighted when over a hundred countries signed their petition, in recognition that stabilizing the Earth's climate requires reducing atmospheric CO₂ concentration from its present 390 ppm back down to 350 ppm — its value in 1987. But their elation was brief. These hundred countries were not the rich and powerful countries that fear change because they have so much to lose; but mostly the poorer countries, whose people will suffer the most from rising temperatures and spreading droughts.

No agreement was reached in Copenhagen, because the wealthy nations put their short-term self interest above the needs of the Earth and its ecosystems. Transforming their consumer economies and standing up to the powerful fossil fuel industry was simply too much of a political risk. In private, our noble leaders told the 350 team just this — until you can convince the American people that it is in their interest to change direction, we can do nothing!

We are slow to recognize that in this conflict between our fossil fuel technology and the Earth system, the Earth wins, hands-down. There were reminders this summer. An oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico showed that a profit-driven and unregulated oil industry is no match for a pressurized deep-water reservoir. The Russian heat wave caused massive wildfires and drought that destroyed a third of that country's grain crop, driving up global wheat prices.

After Copenhagen the U.S. 350 group felt defeated, but their colleagues from around the planet offered encouragement with this reminder: "Governments everywhere are corrupt: we, the people, must take action." As the American empire declines, our lost ideals are reflected back to us by a global democratic community. So today, 10/10/10, is again a day of climate action around the world.

At 350.org you can see the kaleidoscope of people from almost every country on Earth planning for our collective future. They know that it will not be easy — but we are one planet and one people, and together we create the future of the Earth. Will you join them? It is not too late.