

Rutland Herald

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Article published Mar 23, 2008

The Weekly Planet

A challenge we all face

By ALAN BETTS

Why are our global environmental problems such a challenge?

Despite our reluctance, we must face the conflicts between personal choice (that is so precious to us), the public interest and the interests of life on this planet. Put rather starkly, do we as Americans have the right to trash the planet to maintain our treasured way of life? So take a deep breath, let it out with a sigh, think of our children and remember that spring is coming!

Sometimes I reflect on the analogy between smoking and the global carbon-dioxide pollution that comes from the burning of fossil fuels. We now have public health advertising to warn teenagers of the long-term hazards of smoking. Why? Because for decades the tobacco industry encouraged teenagers to start smoking as a way of building its future market. Since lung cancer can take 30 years to develop, immediate pleasure all too often prevails over the long-term risk of ill health and death. The realization that infants and children are harmed by tobacco smoke has helped turn the tide of public opinion, but that shift has occurred slowly in the face of false advertising from the tobacco industry.

The biggest consequences from all our carbon dioxide emissions are also in the future, so it's hard to grasp the significance of our addiction to fossil fuels for our children. Yet as the decades pass and we steadily ignore the vast scale of the issue, the transformation of the earth's climate and the melting of the glacial ice caps are well underway. Powerful interests again invest in propaganda to keep us addicted, so as to prop up their profits, their ideologies and their way of life for a few more years. This is a profound issue for our society, because the value and integrity of our scientific knowledge are vulnerable to ideological attack.

Here the analogy ends. If you stop smoking, generally your health improves in a few years. But the earth is now so far out of energy balance that even if we stopped burning fossil fuels tomorrow, our planet would go on warming for more than 50 years. Unlike cigarette smoke that quickly dissipates, the extra carbon dioxide we are adding to the atmosphere will stay for a century or more. Forests will remove some, but globally our forests are shrinking. It will take centuries for this extra carbon dioxide to be removed as it sinks again in sediments to the bottom of the oceans.

We try to ignore the long-term consequences, even though they are plain to see. Millions of people may starve as more food is converted to biofuels to drive our inefficient cars. Millions more may drown when tropical storms intensify and sea levels rise, as the oceans warm and the polar ice melts and the glaciers slide into the sea. Yet this will be the cumulative effect of our lifestyle choices and our deeply rooted belief that we have the right to waste fossil fuel energy, as long as we pay for it. (We are of course having trouble paying for it, and our society is sinking deeper into debt and warfare.)

For every American, about 20 tons of carbon dioxide are added to the atmosphere every year. As rising seas and stronger storms flood vulnerable coasts like Bangladesh, we will see the tragedy of New Orleans repeated over and over around the world. Will we just blame someone else? This is uncomfortable news for our society, but it must be faced. It is time to change course and start asking what is good for the Earth (not just me): for all its creatures and all of humanity, too. It will take decades to rebuild an efficient society, powered by renewable sources of energy.

But you protest: "My contribution to global warming is so small. I can do so little by myself. I cannot be responsible for all the suffering on this vast Earth. Please leave me alone; I have my own struggles in life!"

All this is true. This global crisis was not created by any one individual; but by our consumer societies, largely in ignorance, from our collective values and priorities. So yes, this crisis calls for a community solution beyond the personal commitment that each of us must make.

Our community is now the whole planet, not just human society, but the interconnected web of life on Earth that sustains us all. We must confront where we are headed, and change direction — soon — away from business as usual. This will take courage, humility and creativity, but it will give us a new vision, and transform hopelessness and despair into joy. Spring is coming, and it's time to plant new seeds of hope.

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Scientist speaks out: http://www.seedmagazine.com/news/2007/03/the_new_scientist.php

EU told to prepare for flood of climate change migrants: www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/mar/10/climatechange.eu