

Rising tide: An environmental issue and a justice issue

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In his State of the Union address, President Bush once again sounded the alarm about America's dependence on foreign oil, and he called for a reduction in gasoline consumption by 20 percent over the next 10 years. But Bush framed the issue largely as a national security concern: dependence on foreign oil leaves the U.S. vulnerable to hostile regimes and to terrorists who can harm our economy by disrupting the flow of oil. He said little about the environmental need to conserve resources and reduce planet-heating greenhouse gases.

Global warming is happening at a greater rate than scientists predicted only several years ago. According to an article in *Science* magazine last month, the sea level could rise 20 to 55 inches by the year 2100. About 1 percent of the earth's surface was blighted by extreme drought 20 years ago; that figure has risen to 2 percent, and by 2050 it could rise to 20 percent.

These changes are more than an environmental issue, says Sir John Houghton, one of the world's leading climatologists; they represent a justice issue. The poorest people of the world will pay the greatest price for the effects of climate change. If the sea rises only one meter (a little over 39 inches), it will displace 10 million people in Bangladesh alone. Extreme drought could create 150 million refugees—again, among the world's poorest inhabitants.

Given the urgency of this crisis, citizens are going to have to take the lead in changing lifestyles. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, if every American household were to replace just one light bulb with an Energy Star-rated compact fluorescent light bulb, the energy saved could light more than 2.5 million homes for a year and prevent greenhouse gases equivalent to the emissions of nearly 800,000 cars.

Institutions too can make a difference. St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, has installed a wind turbine that supplies the campus with one-third of its electricity.

Funded by Xcel Energy's Renewable Development Fund, the turbine reduces the school's carbon impact by more than 20 percent. Carleton College, on the opposite end of town, has an identical wind turbine, the first utility-grade wind turbine in the country to be owned by a college.

After a Chinese congregation in a Chicago suburb studied climate change, grade school children asked church leaders to stop using Styrofoam cups at church functions. One member, an executive for a chemical company, tightened the environmental standards for the chemicals his company purchases from foreign suppliers. It turned out that because the products are cleaner, his company can charge more for them—a sign that being environment-friendly isn't necessarily unfriendly to the bottom line.

But until public policies are drastically revised at the federal level, there isn't much hope of a significant slowing down of climate change. The U.S. is the largest polluter in the world, emitting a quarter of all greenhouse gases. The rest of the world, says Houghton, is looking to the U.S. to take the lead.