

Climate Change and Us: Taking Responsibility for the Future

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With the election of a new President and a new Congress, we have fresh confidence that our country will join the rest of the world in recognizing the seriousness of climate change and acting to lessen its severity. This hope does not bring freedom from responsibility. Our question here is what actions the Congress must take and what our role, as informed and caring citizens, is in reducing climate change.

Anthropogenic climate change has been accepted as scientific fact, some thirty five years after Al Gore was taught it in his college science class. This is long overdue, but welcome news as the world scrambles to lessen the degree of climate change. For those of us who are concerned about any aspect of the natural world, we know that climate change has a greater effect than any of the environmental challenges with which we have wrestled. Perhaps it is helpful to have this sense of proportion imposed on us, because climate change is a unifying principle for much of our work: we must address it because of forest health, species extinction, changes in hydrologic patterns. It also has the potential to unify groups that traditionally oppose each other: ski operators and birders are equally concerned about decreases in snowfall. In many areas of environmental protection, the prescriptions for slowing climate change fit seamlessly with the policies that we have long advocated. But slowing climate change is a far greater challenge than we have faced in any other area of natural resource management.

Carbon pollution is a different sort of challenge than that posed by more conventional pollutants. Carbon is integral to our industrialized world; it is the reason why the U.S. leads the world in per capita emissions and some parts of the world have such low emissions. Our per capita emissions in the U.S. are about 20 tons per person, compared with 1.1 tons per person in India. A transformation akin to that of the industrial revolution is required to convert to a low carbon economy. Indeed, proponents have used the analogy to the Apollo Project to explain what must be done. And, to truly understand the dimensions of what we face, the world soon will have a population of perhaps 9 billion people, all of whom have material aspirations comparable to ours, but who will be trying to achieve them under conditions of a severely degraded environment. Clean drinking water, refrigeration, personal transportation, consumption of meat, electronics, and other privileges of the developed world are now being sought by China, India, and other rapidly developing nations. The justice of these demands is undeniable, but the danger of a world populated by high carbon emitters also is undeniable.

All rational people know that the transformation to different energy sources is an imperative. There are many promising solutions to replacing carbon fuels as sources of transportation fuels, electricity and heating. Why have these solutions not been utilized and why has climate legislation failed in our country? We have to ask these questions because of the implications that our inaction has for 2009, even with a new President and Congress.

The reasons are many. Our scientific and administrative agencies have been severely damaged during the last eight years. Even before then, there was a concerted effort in the United States to discredit scientific researchers (see Ross Gelbspan, The Heat Is On: The High Stakes Battle Over Earth's Threatened Climate (1997)). In the current administration, we have seen the censorship of scientific reports by federal political appointees. Look at EPA, which was founded in an era of hopefulness when the nation awoke to the destruction of the natural world and the threats to our health from pollution. In the past eight years this agency was subject to political interference, its employees ordered to refrain from applying the Clean Air Act to carbon dioxide and ordered to downplay the significance of climate change.

Second, it is abundantly clear that special interests exert undue influence in our political processes. Our constitutional framers were aware of this danger, but believed that competition among interests (factions) would neutralize the effect of any single group. But, with carbon as the basis of much of our economy, the oil, gas, and coal lobbies successfully persuaded much of American commerce that doing something about climate change was unnecessary and too expensive. Only recently have we seen fracturing among industries and emergence of new allies for controlling emissions. For example, U.S. CAP, the United States Climate Action Partnership, is a group of business concerns and environmental interests that has been able to find common ground in supporting cap and trade legislation. (<http://www.us-cap.org/>)

Third, we are all too familiar with the partisan divides that have characterized so much of our environmental politics. When the Boxer climate legislation was finally heard this spring, the Republican leadership filibustered by reading the bill out loud on the floor. There is nothing inherently partisan about climate controls: Senators McCain, Warner and Lieberman supported legislation in the Senate, and Representative John Dingell, a Democrat from Michigan, successfully slowed it down in the House.

I wonder about other reasons for inaction as well. It is said that environmentalists are characterized by having a longer temporal framework than others. We also are characterized by empathy for others, both human and other species. We surely all have friends who admit that we are negatively affecting the climate, but see no reason to do anything about it. These differences in psychological make-up require that we understand the perspectives of others and the terms in which they see the world. (Self congratulation on a "better" viewpoint may be misplaced; some brain researchers believe these traits are hard wired, like so much of our psychology.) These differences require that we learn to speak to people who have different frameworks, but who may also share common traits.

The linguist George Lakoff is relied upon by many activists as a guide to speaking about political issues (see, Moral Politics : What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don't, 1966; Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate, 2004)

As grim as it has been to witness our inability to progress on these critical problems, there was a very different story unfolding in the states. Citizens were not passive during this period, despite the inaction in Washington. In fact, the typical relationship between the federal and state governments over environmental regulation was transformed, as states moved to impose their own regulatory programs on greenhouse gasses. California, led by a dedicated school teacher who is a member of the Assembly, mandated a 25% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, Governor Schwarzenegger and governors from other states and nations just concluded a summit on climate where each pledged to act to limit emissions.

Here in New Mexico Governor Richardson identified global warming as a priority of his administration and has committed to state action with an impressive tenacity. I regard this action as extraordinary because the state could have ignored global warming, with no legal or political remedy available to citizens. Instead the Governor utilized the executive powers at his control to create a task force to create a plan, tasked his executive agencies with a series of actions, in some instances courting legal challenges (for example, the Clean Car Initiative was challenged by car manufacturers), ordered an inventory of greenhouse gas emissions (Parts 73 (20.2.73 NMAC) and 87 (20.2.87 NMAC) and entered into an ambitious regional initiative to cap and trade greenhouse gasses (the Western Climate Initiative, found at www.westernclimateinitiative.org)

Controlling greenhouse gasses is a multifaceted problem and the state's actions have recognized this by involving a number of state agencies. While the Environment Department has been the lead agency, the Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department has a substantial role for several reasons. The state's renewable energy subsidies are located in the Department and guidance to the general public on solar, wind, and other tax credits is given by the Department. Oil and gas activity is regulated by the Department and the state learned that these operations are the source of substantial greenhouse gas emissions. Note that these emissions are from the development of these sources, before the products are even used by the eventual consumers. Because coal has been a major source of energy within the state, the state has committed to exploration of means of sequestering carbon.

As impressive as these actions by state government are, we do not yet know if New Mexico will adopt binding emission limitations on CO₂ emitters. The problem, in a nutshell, is that the Governor has acted using administrative authorities, aided by careful consensus building among affected industries. However, when actual emission limitations are imposed or a price put on the discharge of greenhouse gasses, the consensus may well break apart.

A brief look at the last two decades shows federal inaction, with some states stepping forward to take on this issue. All this should change, with the election of Barack

Obama, who has pledged to pursue legislation to establish a cap and trade system at the federal level. (Greenwire) Mr. Obama has reiterated that he will seek reductions of 80 percent by 2050, and invest \$150 billion in new energy-saving technologies.

Despite the welcome support of a new president, it is by no means assured that the Congress will pass meaningful limitations on carbon emissions. The entities that have blocked action for the last few decades are still extant. The opponents of regulation might be categorized: those who do not believe that climate change is happening as a result of human influences; those who believe that it is, but who believe that there are negative economic consequences to action, and those who believe that it will be cheaper to adapt to climate change than to prevent it. To be more cynical, and more candid, it is pretty evident that there are some industries that have concluded that it is in their self interest to stall climate action, regardless of the effect on the planet.

We are needed, at this critical time, to break through the political opposition to controlling carbon emissions.

The fact is that individual action, while necessary, is not sufficient to make enough of a difference. We need different sources of heat, electricity and different modes of transportation- and very few of us can bring our emissions down sufficiently without those fundamental changes. Here are a few ideas to convey as you speak to your community about climate change:

First, we need the Congress to limit emissions so that we reduce emissions by 2050 to no greater than 80% of current emissions. Scientists warn that more than two degrees Celsius of warming could have disastrous consequences for all life on this planet. There are several ways that the country could implement these reductions, but the political consensus has settled on a cap and trade system. Cap and trade was pioneered in the Clean Air Act of 1990, when it was used to place an overall limit on sulfur dioxide emissions, with industries allowed to trade among themselves. The advantage of this approach compared to traditional pollution control programs is that the market decides where the pollution allowances have the highest value, and an extensive regulatory system is avoided. There are a host of weighty questions associated with cap and trade, however, and the answers to them will determine if the country actually makes significant reductions in emissions.

Second, I think that we play a useful role by advocating for a system that is sufficiently stringent to bring about the substantial reductions in greenhouse gasses that are needed. But, if you were to accept the call to speak for the earth, it seems to me that there is one very simple message that we need to convey. Coal is an unacceptable energy source for the 21st century, unless a means of sequestering its carbon is found. Coal is responsible for 40% of our current CO₂ emissions. There are approximately 100 new plants on the drawing board, with no legal requirement of sequestration. Once built, they likely will be used for 50 years. It seems as though a variety of pressures may soon prevent the construction of new coal fired power plants, such as a recent licensing decision by the EPA Board of Appeals (In Re Deseret Power Electric Cooperative, PSD

Appeal No. 07-03, November 13, 2008) and the downgrading of coal stocks by major banks. Here in New Mexico we watch with interest to see whether the proposed Desert Rock power plant will ever be built as designed. (Background on the facility can be found at the proponents web site (www.desertrockenergy.com) and at those of the opposition (see, <http://www.sanjuancitizens.org/air/desertrock.shtml>))

Third, there is a raging battle over whether it costs money or saves money to address climate change. It seems to me that this dispute is often one of people talking across each other; while there are likely short term impacts from cap and trade, the economic costs of failing to act are far higher. The definitive report on this is the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change (<http://www.occ.gov.uk/activities/stern.htm>) which contrasted the annual costs of mitigation against the major economic and social disruptions from a failure to act.

Of course, the opponents of action argue that this is a particularly poor time to do anything, because of our economic crisis. President Elect Obama seems to have come down squarely on the side of protecting our economy by taking action on energy and his advisors are recommending investments in renewable energy as part of the stimulus package. He also has announced his support for prompt action on national cap and trade legislation.

But, the popularity of the “drill, baby, drill” slogan among some Americans indicates the political difficulty of enacting any measure that arguably will increase energy costs. Perhaps the true cost of dependence on foreign oil is better understood after the recent run-up in gasoline prices, and the arguments for alternative energy sources and the necessity of converting from carbon sources will be better understood. The information is readily available to persuade our communities that this transition will leave us and our children better off, but the conflict is undeniable.

Fourth, this leads to how we discuss values in the public sphere. We know that adaptation will not work for many species, with some estimates as high as a 50% loss of all species on earth should we continue business as usual. One might argue that this is a dangerous loss to humans, because of the loss of potential cures for diseases, etc., but I believe this pragmatic approach diminishes us, because the relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world is so much more. I ask my students to write about their values because the conversation that they will have should they practice in this field, as lobbyists for example, ultimately reveals one’s moral values. As a country, we decided that human caused extinction of species is wrong and the Endangered Species Act remains popular among Americans. If we were to talk about this in a different setting; among friends, for example, wouldn’t we admit that we love the natural world and that we are heartbroken by the losses that threaten it? As faith communities enter into the political battles over global warming, it is refreshing to hear “Creation” be explicitly invoked. There is no reason to fit extinction into a reductionist calculus of lost benefits to humans; far more is at stake than the potential loss of a new drug. I would urge us to take a chance on revealing our values; I think we will find far more resonance on that level than in the arcane debates over how a cap and trade program is structured.

Much more should be said about how we join the climate struggle. We do need to understand how a transition to a noncarbon future is possible and the impediments to doing so. The opportunities for carbon sequestration are relevant to forestry efforts. The means by which the developing world can develop without the same carbon output as the developed world must be addressed.

We need to write our members of Congress; attend Town Halls; write letters to the editor; put it on Facebook; join groups; fly less; eat less meat; turn off the lights; and everything else we can think of. Fortunately, a host of outstanding individuals and organizations are engaged in this work and the information concerning these issues is readily available. In whatever setting you lend your efforts you will be joining in an effort that is sure to raise your spirits. Perhaps the satisfaction one feels from a heartfelt engagement in one of the most important issues of our time is another form of connection to nature- the nature that is shared by humans and the rest of the natural world.

Thank you and stay in touch.