

AMERICA'S MORAL OBLIGATION FOR GLOBAL WARMING

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho (ngier@uidaho.edu)

There is now an overwhelming scientific consensus that human are the major cause of the increase in global warming since the Industrial Revolution. The American contribution is way out of proportion compared to other countries. Each American releases 5 tons of carbon into the atmosphere each year, while each Japanese and European annually produces 2.25 tons. The world average is one ton per person each year.

As Henry I. Miller, a fellow with the conservative Hoover Institution, states: "Like the sinking of the Titanic, catastrophes are not democratic, a much higher fraction of passengers from the cheaper decks were lost. We'll see the same phenomenon with global warming."

With 10 percent of the world's population, Americans and Europeans produce two-thirds of the carbon, while Africa with 13 percent produces only 3 percent of the emissions. For every \$100 the U.S. and Europe spend on mitigating global warming in their own countries, they give only one dollar to Africans to solve problems for which they are largely not responsible.

Global warming will have the most impact in the Arctic and all countries near the equator, causing the polar ice cap to melt and producing more powerful hurricanes and cyclones. In 2006 countries fronting the Eastern Pacific were devastated by monster cyclones.

Rising sea levels caused by melting glaciers and ice packs will dramatically impact low level countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Pacific Island nations, and Bangladesh, where more than 150 million people are living on land the size of Iowa barely above sea level. Melting glaciers in the Himalayas that empty into three major rivers, combined with rising sea levels and higher tides, will permanently flood one quarter of the country by the end of the century.

While some areas will have too much water, other areas will go without. Global warming is accelerating the loss of arable land to desert, and droughts will be longer and more

severe. China alone loses 1,400 square miles of land to desert every year, and Kazakhstan has lost half its crop land since 1980. If the world's temperatures increase 3.6 percent, a recent UN report predicts that "as many as 2 billion people could be without water and about 20-30 percent of the world's species [particularly amphibians] near extinction."

Another way to look at the global impact of climate change is in terms of economic losses and reduction in Gross National Product. Sir Nicholas Stern, a World Bank economist, has estimated that for every degree of global warming there will be an average reduction of one percent in world GNP. But because of the fragile economies of third world countries, the economic impact there will be far worse. If nothing is done to stem global warming, Stern predicts that the world economy will suffer a permanent loss of 20 percent, with poorer countries suffering the most.

A simple moral truth is that if you injure people or directly affect their livelihoods, then they are owed compensation. Even libertarians believe this. Arguing against President Nixon's proposal to create the Environmental Protection Agency, libertarians proposed that it would be more efficient for those injured by pollution to file class action suits in the courts.

How could Americans and Europeans meet their moral obligations for damage caused by their carbon production? Sir Nicholas has calculated that will take an investment equivalent to one percent of world GNP to prevent the greatest of the Great Depressions.

Stern proposes that there are two ways to avoid this catastrophe. First, we could levee a carbon tax, and that would of course fall heaviest on Americans. The tax proceeds would be placed in a fund to alleviate the effects of climate change in other countries.

The second solution is carbon rationing, by which businesses and institutions could sell the carbon allotment that they do not use, and then consume non-carbon based energy instead. Many of us are now doing that by buying wind power shares from our local utilities.

Scientists predict that there will soon come a tipping point when, no matter what we do, the planet will continue to warm for centuries. Now is the time for the world's governments to act decisively.

I truly hope that Harvard University oceanographer James McCarthy is correct when he says that "the worst stuff is not going to happen because we can't be that stupid."

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read his columns as the "Palouse Pundit" at www.NickGier.com.