

ENOUGH HEAT

By Ed O'Rourke

Greenpeace campaigner Hilal Atici observed, "If world leaders are unwilling or unable to protect their citizens against the massive floods, droughts, food crises and mass displacements that scientists predict, their leadership becomes meaningless." Climate change presents a challenge more powerful and subtle than that of the Axis Powers in World War Two.

The harsh predictions are based on scientific observations. Antarctic ice core samples show that methane and carbon dioxide levels are higher than at any time in the past 650,000 years. Carbon dioxide levels rose faster in the twentieth century than they have in the past 20,000 years. Professor Martin Perry of the United Kingdom's Metrological Office states that a temperate rise of 2.1 to 2.3°C (about 4° F) will expose up to three billion people to water shortages. As the glaciers in the Andes and Himalayas disappear, people who depend on the meltwater in Pakistan, western China, central Asia, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia will be in distress. There will be longer and more severe droughts in southern Africa, Australia and the Mediterranean area. As temperatures rise, the incidence of malaria, diarrhea and cholera will increase. Heat waves like ones the Europeans suffered in 2003 will become more frequent. The moral outrage is that countries like Bangladesh and Ethiopia that have few carbon emissions will suffer the most.

British journalist George Monbiot, in his book *Heat: How to Stop the Planet From Burning* (South End Press, Cambridge, MA, 278 pages), offers bold solutions that will change our lifestyles and will take deliberate and massive investment. Most of his examples are British but easily understandable anywhere in the wealthy countries. He covers a lot of ground: psychological resistance to accepting climate adjustments, rationing of carbon dioxide emissions, improvement in cars' miles per gallon, energy conscious building design, sharp reductions in air travel, scraping biofuels, and reorganizing supermarkets.

People have heard plenty about global warming. Even though ExxonMobil and the climate change deniers have churned out plenty of misleading information that does not stand up to scientific scrutiny, the driving force for the lack of public action is that people do not want to believe it. Like an active alcoholic or addict, the public cannot force itself to give up its lifestyle. A truly inconvenient task is reconciling the American way of life and its tremendous waste with sustainable living that would ensure humankind's survival. A look at the American presidential campaign will show that any candidate with an environmental agenda will not get a hearing.

The link of cause and effect is nearly impossible to envision. How can driving your car to church, traveling to Munich or turning your thermostat to 72° F during the Houston summers kill anybody?

There is a similar mismatch in the body politic. Any politician wishing to impose enhanced building standards, a decrease in toxic emissions or mileage improvements, will hear a hundred reasons not to do it right away.

What is the best way to achieve a 90% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions? They have to be absolute cuts, no gimmicky formulae coupled with economic growth and no carbon trading. Monbiot feels that an energy tax would hit the poor disproportionately and regulations would be too complicated. The easy way out is rationing. Every person and business will receive ration coupons or a type of debit card to pay for gasoline, airline tickets, the utilities and the rest, as during World War Two. The carbon rationing will drive the demand for low-carbon technologies, mass transit, and renewable energy.

There would have to be a government supervised program to properly insulate all homes, businesses, and non-profits. Our government will need to set national insulation requirements and subsidies for the poor to achieve them. The passive houses (passivhaus) in Germany have no active air conditioning or heating systems. Triple glazed windows have to become the new standard for homes and businesses.

To reduce electricity peak loads, new products such as washing machines, dishwashers, air conditioners, and refrigerators will have switches that will cut themselves off temporarily during peak times and resume later. This would help avoid constructing new power plants. Of course, to avoid food spoilage and discomfort during the summer, none of these products can be off for a long time.

Regulations to improve miles per gallon fuel efficiency must override the manufacturers' motivations to improve speed and acceleration. The top speed on my car's speedometer is 110 miles per hour (about 180 kilometers per hour). I would be a menace to myself and everyone else on the road at that speed. The Audi S4 can go from 0 to 60 miles per hour in 4.5 seconds. Why? A good option is make all cars' (with the exception of emergency vehicles) top speed of about 70 miles per hour with slower acceleration than the Audi S4. Make the national speed limit 55 miles per hour.

One of the sad facts of today's world is that 800 million people are malnourished. While there is corruption and inefficiency in most poor countries, the buying habits of the wealthy countries exact their toll on hungry people. Much of the global increase in crop production is used to feed animals. The world's animal population has quintupled since 1950. People who buy meat and dairy products have more purchasing power than those who can buy or grow only subsistence crops

The biofuels approach to replace carbon-based fuels is a human and environmental disaster. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization has reported a "surge in the prices of cereals, in particular, wheat and maize" to "levels not seen for a decade" partly due to "a fast growing demand for biofuel production." In a 2005 report, Friends of the Earth showed that the palm-oil plantations in Malaysia have been responsible for an estimated 87% of the deforestation in that country. Moreover, about 6 million more hectares in Malaysia plus 16.5 million in Indonesia are scheduled for clearance.

Air travel is one of the most environmentally destructive activities in which humans engage. The mean distance covered by car per year in the United Kingdom is 9,200 miles. A Briton could conceivably cover this distance by plane in one day. Besides the carbon emissions, jet aircraft emit gases and particles that have 2.7 times the effect of carbon alone. Monbiot looks at more direct air routes, better traffic control to reduce times on the runways, better fuel efficiencies, and aircraft design and comes up blank for making significant reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. Humans will have to reduce the number, length and speed of the trips made.

This means—at the very least—no more new airports, no more airport expansions, and probably a cap on the number of airplanes licensed worldwide and in each country. He says, "If you fly, you destroy other people's lives."

Ecotourism promoters sincerely believe that they are helping the environment and eradicating poverty by featuring tours to poor countries. Monbiot refers the reader to www.responsibletravel.com to see how well-meaning people along with Exxon executives combine to destroy the biosphere. “You could build 3,000 footbridges, spend your life’s savings on gate fees in Kenya, slosh around in the wetlands until you had trenchfoot, and not redress a fraction of the impact caused by your flight. In the name of assisting people of developing countries, this company is helping to starve the Ethiopians and drown the people of Bangladesh.”

Monbiot looked at the unnecessary expenses of supermarkets in the United Kingdom. The refrigerators and heaters have no doors so that the refrigerators and the heaters battle each other all day long. One solution is to turn the stores into warehouses. The only people in them would be suppliers and employees. Since there would be no customers in the warehouses, there would be no need for supersaturated lighting, open freezers, open heaters, displays or fancy packaging. Part of the bargain would be installing email capability in low-income homes and training customers how to use them. A (British) Department of Transportation study suggests that the use of email to place orders, and a service to deliver purchases would reduce British vehicular traffic by 70%.

Prestigious people such as former French president Jacques Chirac along with many newspapers have praised Monbiot’s book. I hope the next edition of this book will be more specific in terms of achieving a 90% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. He cites several sources but did not detail the processes what will accomplish the full 90%. To his credit, he mentions a smaller role for the British armed forces and offered a rain check on further discussion.

There is constant reference to sacrifice in articles and books on climate change. What would we be giving up? I welcome fewer junk products, fewer cars, fewer farm subsidies, fewer wars to gain petroleum access, shorter commute times and fewer traffic jams. I would miss air travel.

The picture that Monbiot presents would include far less international trade and far more regional economies. When I was a teenager in the late 1950s, I could remember some fruits and vegetables being out of season. A return to that inconvenience, along with a few other lifestyle changes, would amount to a small price to pay for saving our planet.

To my knowledge, no one has presented a comprehensive report on what is needed in our own nation. Along with long known concerns of energy efficiency in homes and businesses, we need environmentalists to examine the US military budget, the American prisons, American health care, and the so-called war on drugs for waste and environmental degradation. Improvement here would free up resources and shorten the work week. The United States military budget is about equal to that of the rest of the world. More than 20% of the world's prisoners are in the United States. Of all the wealthy countries, the United States has the higher percentage of its gross domestic product devoted to health care. In Houston, Texas USA, a teenager can obtain marijuana far easier than he or she can obtain cigarettes. There has to be a more efficient way of doing things.

The environmental community has to be unafraid to look at all economic activity and see that necessary disruptions are evenly distributed in our country and throughout the world.

Ed O'Rourke is an environmental accountant in Houston, Texas USA.