

The Environmental Global Village



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Our era has been one of unbridled, even aggressive, development. This must now be replaced by prudence, self-discipline and respect for the natural environment.

— Environment Minister Lucien Bouchard, speaking to a conference on global climate change, New York, March 2, 1989.

The planet's environment is in trouble. The world's first inquiry on the biosphere, the Brundtland Commission, has indicated that "major, unintended changes are occurring in the atmosphere, in soils, in waters, among plants and animals."

The United Nations-sponsored commission said that the rate of environmental deterioration is accelerating as the world's human population grows and as people seek more material goods. It is a global problem.

What are the big environmental issues that the world has to face?

State of the Air

The atmosphere is as thin and fragile as the dew on an apple. As it changes overhead, people are starting to realize just how vulnerable the earth is to environmental changes. Air pollution threatens the future of everyone. The billions of tonnes of pollution injected into the skies are acidifying large areas of the earth, warming the global climate and thinning the high-altitude sun-screen called the ozone layer.

Possibly the most serious threat comes from the destruction of the ozone layer — that thin, invisible screen of gases high above. That natural sun shield, which evolved over billions of years, is under constant attack by chemicals that are used every day in refrigeration, air conditioning and some aerosol cans and foam plastics.

When these chemicals collect in the stratosphere, they reduce the ozone layer with the result that more harmful ultra-violet radiation from the

A mixture of rising air pollutants creates a new balance of gases in the sky and hazardous fallout on the land and water below.

sun reaches ground level. The UV-B radiation increases the risk of skin cancer and eye damage and it suppresses the immune systems. The same radiation harms such basic crops as wheat, corn, soya and rice and it kills plankton in the upper layers of the ocean.

The second big atmospheric threat is that of climate change.

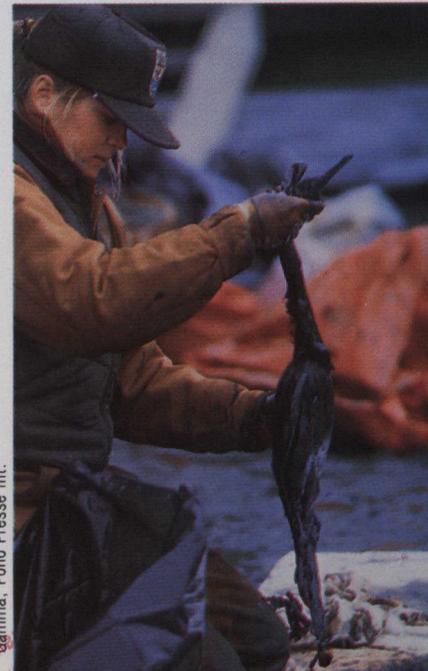
Whenever wood, coal, oil and natural gas are burned, carbon dioxide is emitted into the atmosphere. Every year billions of tonnes of this waste gas escape into the sky. There it joins other waste gases from industries, farm practices and clearing of forests. The gases trap more of the earth's heat through what is called the greenhouse effect, and this will cause temperatures to rise all over the world.

Scientists warn that over the next few decades the greenhouse effect will cause the greatest climate changes since the glaciers retreated 10 000 years ago.

As the atmosphere warms, the planet's whole heat circulation system will be speeded up, disrupting temperature, storm and rainfall patterns everywhere. In turn this will upset age-old food-production, settlement, economic and lifestyle patterns.

One of the most disturbing changes will be a rise in sea levels, caused partly by thermal expansion of water and partly by melting icecaps. Low coastlines around the world will be flooded, and some island nations face threats to their very existence in the century ahead.

Ecological disasters are most often the result of poorly planned and executed development projects.



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