

Clean energy, overpopulation, black carbon, rising sea level, and other environmental news

By Judy Lowe | 04.16.09

Let's take a quick look at a few of the environmental issues making news today, which include whether old coral formations in Mexico show a [“catastrophic” rise in sea levels](#) 12,000 years ago, and if so, what it might mean today. And more:

Is consumption in industrialized nations more harmful to the environment than overpopulation in the developing world?

Writing at Yale Environment 360, British author Fred Pearce [argues that it is](#). For instance, he says: “Stephen Pacala, director of the Princeton Environment Institute, calculates that the world’s richest half-billion people — that’s about 7 percent of the global population — are responsible for 50 percent of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions. Meanwhile the poorest 50 percent are responsible for just 7 percent of emissions.”

This is an *opinion piece* destined to raise strong feelings for and against. (And as a personal aside that has nothing to do with his article, if you haven't read Mr. Pearce's latest book, “Confessions of an Eco-Sinner: Tracking Down the Sources of My Stuff,” I recommend it.)

But what about black carbon?

A Page 1 story (for those who still read print editions) in today's New York Times, [“Soot From Third-World Stoves Is New Target in Climate Fight,”](#) has a slightly different take:

“While carbon dioxide may be the No. 1 contributor to rising global temperatures, scientists say, black carbon has emerged as an important No. 2, with recent studies estimating that it is responsible for 18 percent of the planet's warming, compared with 40 percent for carbon dioxide. ...

“In Asia and Africa, cookstoves produce the bulk of black carbon, although it also emanates from diesel engines and coal plants there. In the United States and Europe, black carbon emissions have already been reduced significantly by filters and scrubbers. ... One recent study estimated that black carbon might account for as much as half of Arctic warming.”

Where environmental problems are worst

The annual 2009 Index of Leading Environmental Indicators, issued today by Pacific Research Institute, a self-described free-market think tank, and the American Enterprise Institute, [reports](#): “The world's most severe environmental problems, as ranked by the Blacksmith Institute and Green Cross Switzerland, are overwhelmingly problems of poverty in developing nations. No American or Western

European city ranks among the top 50 cities in the world for air pollution in a World Bank ranking.”

Clean energy’s dirty little secret

“Hybrid cars and wind turbines need rare-earth minerals that come with their own hefty environmental price tag,” [reports The Atlantic](#).

The ore in question is neodymium, which writer Lisa Margonelli calls “the pixie dust of green tech – necessary for the lightweight permanent magnets that make Prius motors zoom and for the generators that give wind turbines their electrical buzz.”

The problem: Most of the world’s supply comes from China, raising the question: Are we trading dependence on the Middle East (for oil) for dependence on China?

Coral fossils may suggest that sea level can rise rapidly

In connection with a study being published in the journal Nature, [Andrew Revkin of The New York Times writes](#): “Evidence from fossil coral reefs in Mexico underlines the potential for a sudden jump in sea levels because of global warming, scientists report in a new study.”

But not all experts agree with the conclusion of the study, that sea levels can rise up to several yards in a century. [In his blog](#), Revkin promises to talk with other experts and report their opinions.

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