

Is there no news?

Our summer is almost over, well at least in terms of school and vacation are concerned. (Technically, summer ends at the autumnal equinox which occurs this year on September 22nd. So enjoy the "extra" month of summer despite what your boss tell you. Over the past three months I hope everyone has had an opportunity to rest, relax, and become rejuvenated. Summers can be difficult times to keep up with the news, especially if one is traveling or dedicated to long-delayed projects—such as roofing the garage, painting the house, or planting that prairie one has always wanted. In particular, keeping up with environmental news can be even more trying because mainstream media pay so little attention to it, while at the same time granting unbelievable time and space to the goings-on of the Martha Stewarts and Kobe Bryants of the world. Consider the following environmentally-rooted happenings that have occurred in the past month or so. Ask yourself if they deserve more attention than they received by you or by the media. (To encourage all of us to stay aware of environmental events, I provide a list of a few electronic sites where such news is readily available.)

News Item #1: Coal-fired plants are getting a political boost.

Despite its long association with toxic pollutants and poor air quality, coal is still getting favorable support by the current U.S. administration and the many prospectors who are looking to make serious bucks on energy resources during a period when the other fossil fuel sources, namely, petroleum and natural gas, steadily increase in price. According to the National Energy Technology Laboratory, a wing of the U.S. Department of Energy, 94 additional coal-fired plants are currently planned to meet ever-increasing electrical demands in the United States. While some of these plants are speculative, more than half are expected to be built. Locals should be unhappy to hear that Illinois leads the nation with the most proposals among U.S. states. Apparently, the current U.S. administration has moved away from the creation of natural gas plants which had been the more environmentally-savvy solution supported by previous administrations. While at first glance, this switch can be explained on the basis on recent increases in natural gas costs, a fuller picture takes shape when one considers the Bush Administration's recent backing of many coal-friendly initiatives, including "federal research spending for 'cleaner' coal-burning technology, tax credits to expand investments in mining, and opening new stretches of the public domain in the West to coal leasing" (Schneider). It appears that the coal industrialists have made their voices heard and their pleas are being answered despite the tremendous environmental costs. Consider that many estimates suggest that more people die each year because of health problems linked to coal use than because of homicides or drunk drivers! Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that the current administration is pushing coal so strongly when we realize that 16 of the 25 states where coal has its strongest foothold are known for their Republican allegiance.

News Item #2: Living near a gas station can be deadly for children.

According to a study recently published in the journal *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, children living nearby fuel stations or vehicle-repair garages are four times more likely to develop leukemia as children who don't live close to these facilities (Fuel). If this finding holds up under additional scrutiny, it identifies one additional human cost to our addiction to gasoline and fossil-fuel dependent motor vehicles. Given that leukemia is the most common form of

childhood cancer in developed countries we should be taking these and similar findings very seriously. Additionally, given that most people that live next to these establishments are likely not members of the higher wealth or income brackets, this finding also points to serious environmental justice implications (Reuters). Over the years children have often been allowed to hang "innocently" around gas stations in order to make a few extra bucks pumping for customers. I wonder how many of these children suffered from some form of childhood or adult cancer because of it.

News Item #3: DuPont challenging EPA's charges about chemical related to Teflon.

In July 2004, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) made several allegations against the conduct of DuPont in relation to its production of a chemical known as PFOA, used in producing Teflon. The EPA seeks millions in fines for Dupont's violation of federal laws. Among its most serious claims, the EPA contends that DuPont failed to report that PFOA presents "a substantial risk to human health" (Chase). DuPont's 50-plus page report responds to many of the EPA's claims. DuPont asserts that they had no legal obligation to inform the EPA that PFOA was found in the blood of pregnant employees at one of its plants alleging that the EPA knows that such chemicals are known to pass through the placenta of animals and that the trace amount observed "would pose no risk to human health" (Chase). DuPont also claims that PFOA isn't regulated as hazardous waste and therefore isn't a chemical needing to be reported on. Whether or not DuPont will be forced to pay millions for these purported violations, it does appear that this story represents another case where chemicals are innocent until proven guilty. This policy works for human beings but unfortunately doesn't for chemicals because it allows thousands of potentially dangerous ones to be used and dispersed long before they have been properly tested for human or environmental risks or before the legal apparatus has materialized to protect us, the citizens. Keep informed to see if the EPA or DuPont is the ultimate victor.

News Item #4: States are suing because of global warming!

Is global warming here? Not sure? Well, according to eight U.S. states (including Wisconsin and Iowa from the Midwest), crops damage, rising sea levels and associated reductions in tourism are being caused by global warming. These states have filed a legal suit against the nation's largest public utilities because they are major contributors to pollutants that are believed to drive climate change and global warming. Interesting, rather than seeking financial damages, the states demand caps to future carbon dioxide emissions. Key to the states' case is their alleging that the utilities are responsible for past damage as well as uncertain future damage (as predicted by many climate models). It is the first case of its kind and the verdict will surely set the standard for future cases. If this suit is any indication, it appears that judges will have the ultimate say in the existence of global warming rather than scientific bodies and organizations which study it. One might wonder why Illinois isn't a state in the suit. Well, perhaps this is because of all the untapped coal that lies beneath its soils and all the prospectors who are licking their chops to get a share in it. Apparently it doesn't matter that it is terribly dirty and damaging to our streams and lungs.

News Item #5: Brazil, a developing country, is a top ten polluter?

Strange as it seems, Brazil, a developing

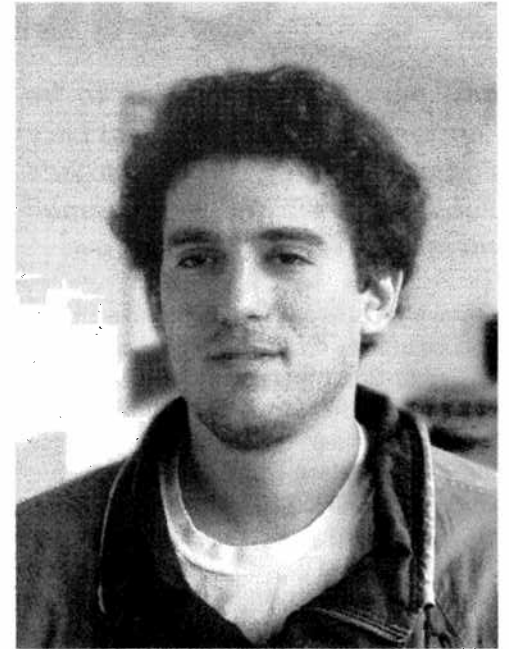
South American country, is now considered a leading global polluter. How so? When one includes the gaseous emissions from the numerous forest fires found within its borders, Brazil pollution levels become higher than most industrialized countries. This fascinating finding is expected to be released soon as part of a government study of the country's greenhouse gas emissions (Bugge). Long thought of as the "lungs" of the Earth for its vast forests, Brazil must now be accountable for its reckless use of this ecological resource. An oft-overlooked detrimental aspect about these fires is not the immense amounts of carbon dioxide that are put in the atmosphere (from combustion) but the significant reductions in carbon dioxide uptake by one of the world's most biologically productive ecosystems, the tropical rainforest. In 2003 alone, it is estimated that an area of the Amazon the size of New Jersey was either hacked or burnt to the ground to make way for "development" (Bugge)—here usually meaning, raising of cattle or the growing of export crops like coffee, bananas and cotton. Not only does this continued reduction in rainforest increase the likelihood and severity of future climate change but it wreaks havoc on the millions of species that find habitat only in its unique environs. In this way, Brazil's new found status should be a warning to all of us.

News Item #6: New species of flightless bird found.

With over 9,000 bird species having already been scientific identified on Earth, it isn't too often that we come across a new one. Yet, every so often scientists do; currently, one or two new birds are identified each year. This new one is located on a remote island of Calayan in the Philippines. Apparently, the species, likely to be known as the Calayan rail, is only found on this one island. Observing a new flightless variety is particularly interesting because one would expect flightless birds to be the easiest to come across and, thus, would have been previously identified.

Many bird species located on islands are particularly vulnerable to extinction because of human encroachment. Many similarly isolated birds have gone extinct because they don't identify danger very well and thus are easily obtained and eaten for sources of protein by local human populations. However, Calayan has very few people and no roads in or to its interior where the new bird was found. And while this story is exciting, statistics on other species of rail are bleak. Twenty-two species have gone extinct since 1600 and eighteen of the remaining twenty flightless varieties are considered threatened (Stoddard). Much needs to be done to ensure that humans will avoid invading these remote areas further. Otherwise, many of the 9,000+ bird species are doomed to extinction this century.

All of the news stories here reported occurred over the course of about a month's time. They certainly aren't an exhaustive list of environmentally-relevant contributions made by conscientious reporters all over the world. In fact, they represent just the tip of the iceberg. Why they don't get more coverage in the mainstream or among our



politicians is something that we all should be concerned about. Perhaps it is time for everyone to make an extra effort to inform themselves and others about matters that are so important to the planet and our species.

Good Websites for Obtaining Environmental News:

- ENN, Environmental News Network; website: www.enn.com
- Planet Ark News Service; website: www.planetark.com
- The Christian Science Monitor; website: www.csmonitor.com
- EnviroLink Network; website: www.envirolink.org
- Worldwatch Institute; website: www.worldwatch.org
- United Nations Environment Programme; website: www.unep.org
- E/The Environmental Magazine; website: www.emagazine.com

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