

## **Moral Responsibility and Effective Action on Climate Change**

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The recent United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report has put global warming back in the headlines. This group of scientists believes that the threat of global warming presents a great and serious challenge. Americans seem to agree with this statement. A 2006 PEW Research Center survey found that approximately 70% of Americans believe global warming is happening and is a serious problem. Yet it remains a low priority. According to this survey, among 19 issues tested, climate change ranked near the bottom for Republicans, Democrats and Independents. It was not in the top ten lists of "very important issues" for any of these groups.

I believe climate change needs to quickly move up on the list of priorities. With some problems the sooner one gets started the easier they are to solve--procrastination can allow the problem to grow and become intractable. Climate change is this kind of problem. Procrastination is dangerous and can no longer be justified. There are at least two reasons for this. The first reason involves risk and moral responsibility. The second involves the need for a timely response. In short, we have a moral responsibility to meet this challenge with a rapid and effective response.

The climate change problem raises the question of risk-taking and moral responsibility. There is now consensus that the earth's climate is getting warmer and humans are very likely the cause. This is the conclusion reached in the recent IPCC report -- perhaps the largest and most impressive group of scientists to ever examine a particular issue. Nonetheless, understanding climate change is difficult and there are still many uncertainties. However, these uncertainties are not enough to justify a tepid response to climate change. We accept that people can take risks with their lives -- smoke cigarettes, eat raw oysters, what have you. However, it's unacceptable to take risks with other people's lives and livelihoods without their consent. This is particularly true if the people put at risk are more likely to be harmed than benefited.

Those of us alive today in the United States might actually benefit from a slow response to climate change and find the current risks acceptable. For instance, one of the reasons given for not responding aggressively is it would cost *us* too much. However, this puts others at greater risk for harm. Poor nations have not yet benefited from the world's fossil fuel economy that has generated so much wealth, but also green house gasses. Consequently, they do not have the economic and technological resources to adapt to the negative consequences of climate change, such as local drought, rising sea

levels, and powerful storms. Future generations are also put at greater risk by a slow response. The potentially really nasty effects of climate change will manifest themselves over decades. The slower our response today, the more likely future generations will experience severe consequences. The recent IPCC report recommended that further temperature rise should be limited to 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, or the world risks crossing a climate “tipping pint” that could produce intolerable impacts on human well-being and the environment. Climate change is the kind of problem that is harder on the poor and gathers momentum over time.

These are reasons for an aggressive, wholehearted response to the challenges of climate change. Americans are optimistic that we can meet this challenge. Of those who think climate change is happening, two-thirds believe we can do something about it. However, the longer we wait to begin, the more difficult the challenge. Energy sustains economic growth, which supports political and social stability. (Samuelson). Currently about 80% of the energy used world-wide comes from fossil fuels. The fundamental challenge is to find alternative and more efficient sources of energy for the developed and developing nations. The research and development required for this technological transition is a time consuming process. Delays in starting this transition may not leave enough time for future generation to accomplish the task and avoid sever consequences (Shue).

“Climate change policy is energy policy (Shue).” Currently, our government spends about 3-billion a year on energy research and development. This does not constitute an energetic and wholehearted effort. For decades, government supported scientific research and technological innovation has been connected to economic growth. In this light, the challenge of climate change should be seen as an opportunity to apply our creativity, not a painful sacrifice.

Global climate change is one of those problems that will become more dangerous and harder to solve the longer we procrastinate. The longer we procrastinate the greater the risk to the very poor and future generations. Therefore, the sooner we raise it to a high priority the more likely we will be able to meet the challenge and fulfill our moral responsibilities.

The PEW Center for People and the Press, “Little Consensus on Global Warming,” <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=280>

Henry Shue, “Responsibilities to Future Generations and Technological Transition” in *Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Economics, Politics, Ethics*, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong & Richard Howarth. Eds. (2005, Elsevier).

Robert Samuelson, “The Dirty Secret about Global Warming,” <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17025081/site/newsweek/>