

The Opportunity of a Lifetime

Three related **trends** are destroying Creation, threatening to make the Earth unsuitable for human habitation.

Your work is urgently needed.

Peter Montague, Ph.D. Feb. 16, 2008 (peter@rachel.org)

1. Global warming

2. Extinction of species (loss of biodiversity)

3. Chemical contamination of everything (food, water, soil, animals, the oceans, fish, and humans, including all of us).

As a consequence of these three trends, young people are inheriting a world that is **becoming unsuitable for human habitation.**

So we all have a **great opportunity** to work together with **urgency** and **purpose** to alter these trends, to **prevent the destruction of Creation.**

Trend #1: Global Warming

The carbon dioxide (CO₂) content of the air has risen 30% since 1750. The average temperature is now rising at the rate of 0.5 deg. Fahrenheit each decade.

Weather is becoming more extreme (more and bigger floods, droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes), causing more crop failures and water shortages.

The ice caps are melting (and penguins, polar bears, and the Eskimo way of life are in danger of disappearing)

Sea level is rising.

New York City, Miami and San Diego (not to mention other cities around the world) are now in danger of catastrophic flooding (storm surge) in this century

The oceans are absorbing carbon dioxide (CO₂), which is **making the oceans more acidic**, threatening the base of the entire oceanic food web.

Trend #2: Extinction of Species

Extinction of species is normal, but now **species are being lost at a rate more than 100 times as fast as the normal historical rate.**

According to the most current, authoritative scientific report, *The Millenium Ecosystem Assessment*, in this century, we may lose...

**** One quarter (25%) of the world's mammals, including lions, tigers, polar bears, rhinoceroses, and most of the apes and monkeys in the world**

And we may lose...

** One-third (33%) of the world's amphibians (salamanders, frogs, toads)

** One out of every 8 bird species (12%)

**** Bees are disappearing – and they pollinate at least 1/3 of our food crops.**

**** Most ocean fisheries are depleted, so we have squandered a source of low-cost dietary protein.**

In sum,

**we are shredding Creation,
shredding the biosphere.**

Trend #3:

Chemical contamination of everything

In the last 15 years we have discovered 3 important things about chemicals...

1. Many chemicals can enter the womb and can "program" a fetus in ways that last a lifetime – causing problems that only become apparent later in life, including some diseases like asthma, diabetes and cancer

2. Many chemicals can mimic, or interfere with, hormones, which are natural chemicals that control growth, development, and behavior from the moment of conception throughout a person's life.

3. All Americans carry hundreds, or thousands, of industrial chemicals in their bodies at low levels.

Almost none of these chemicals have been tested fully to determine their health effects.

The burden of proof is on the public to show that harm is occurring.

All three trends – global warming, loss of species, and chemical contamination – are issues of **justice**.

They affect everyone, but they affect some people worse than others.

These three trends affect us all, but they affect **people of color** and **people of low income** more and worse than they affect the average person.

These are "**environmental justice**" (or "**EJ**") communities – people of color and people of low income.

EJ communities are

1. More **burdened** than the average; and

2. More **vulnerable** to harm than the average.

Burdened: Living in cities, with air pollution from traffic, deteriorated housing, toxic lead in the soil of play grounds, with schools and housing built on industrial toxic waste sites, etc.

Vulnerable:

Higher rates of pollution-related disease (cancer, diabetes, asthma, etc.)

Low income = more people without health insurance, less access to healthy food, etc.

The solution

All of us (especially students and teenagers), can get organized to **defend the future and fight for justice**

Together, we can say "No" to the destruction of the planet, and say "Yes" to green alternatives -- green energy, green chemistry, green buildings, green jobs

-- with **justice for all.**

We need **a new law** that says,

Whenever we make any decision affecting the public we will do **seven things**:

1. Consider all reasonable alternatives (including the alternative of doing nothing) with the intention of choosing the least harmful way

2. Shift the burden of proof:
people making changes that affect the public should have to provide reasonable evidence of no harm (just as drug companies have to provide evidence that their drugs are safe before sale).

3. Consider the effects of our actions on 7 generations.

We could appoint official **guardians of the future** to help decision-makers think about the long-term consequences of their decisions.

4. Consider how "fairness" and justice will be affected by every decision. Who will get benefits, who will be harmed?

**5. Take into consideration
the effects of decisions on
burdened and vulnerable
populations**

6. Consider the cumulative effects of this decision with previous decisions

Do **not** take actions or make decisions in isolation

**7. Give state government
and local governments the
right to say "No" to projects
that are deemed harmful**

The task before us is urgent.

But we **know** what needs to be done.

So there is every reason for hope.