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Global Warming May Be Hazardous to Your Health

Can you imagine a planet where tropical diseases like malaria, cholera, typhoid, and dengue run rampant? Can you imagine asthma and respiratory diseases occurring in the majority of the population? Can you envision a world where heat strokes would become a common reason for death? All of this may very well happen here – on our planet – Earth!

Global warming was first detected back in 1896 by a Swedish chemist named Svante Arrhenius (Cooper 1). Just as Arrhenius predicted, during the last 50 years, emissions from industry have been the major influence on our changing world climate. The primary culprit is carbon dioxide that acts as a greenhouse gas, trapping solar radiation and heating up the earth (Calvin). “Since the late 1800’s, the global average temperature has increased about 0.7 to 1.4° F” (Mastrandrea and Schneider 232). Experts see the possibility that world temperatures may continue to increase another 0.5° F every ten years, causing drastic effects to our earth (“Greenhouse” 35). Since 1998, our earth has experienced the five hottest years in recorded time, with the hottest year being 2005 (Choo).

Just one of the effects of increasing temperatures may be the onset of new and unforeseen health hazards. Dr. Carlos Corvalan of the World Health Organization (WHO) says, “The evidence is accumulating, and ecological and human health impacts are expected. We are also concerned that the health impacts of global warming will strike hardest at developing nations, particularly the poorest” (qtd. in Agnew). Vasseur concurs saying, “...deaths, starvation, and infectious diseases have been predicted, especially in developing countries” (593). She warns that cholera, typhoid, and malaria could engulf areas that lack adequate hygiene, and that these diseases could continue to spread northward and southward beyond the tropics (593).

Disease outbreaks may be triggered as a result of extreme weather events, like droughts or heavy rainfall (“Early”1). In the U.S., a prolonged drought in the ‘90s disrupted the ecosystem,

killing predator snakes, coyotes, and owls, which, after a following period of heavy rains, led to a thriving, increasing rodent population that resulted in the “emergence of a new disease – Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome – ...transmitted to humans via the rodent’s droppings” (Kingsnorth 124). Currently, in U.S. urban areas, we are experiencing increased cases of heat strokes, as well as, asthma and other respiratory problems – all related to global warming (Vasseur 593).

In a study at Duke University, reported by the *New York Times*, poison ivy “grew much faster under CO₂ conditions similar to those projected for the middle of the century,” resulting in a “more noxious form of its rash-causing chemical” (Fountain). Additionally, the article reports that “disease-carrying ticks have already been shown to have moved northward into Sweden,” and that mosquitoes may be flying farther and showing up in more places (Fountain). According to this same author, we can blame outbreaks of West Nile virus in New York and equine encephalitis in the Northeastern U.S. on mosquitoes. In addition to the mosquito problem, *Scientific American* reports:

Dengue, or "breakbone," fever (a severe flulike viral illness that sometimes causes fatal internal bleeding) is spreading as well. Today it afflicts an estimated 50 million to 100 million in the tropics and subtropics (mainly in urban areas and their surroundings). It has broadened its range in the Americas over the past 10 years and had reached down to Buenos Aires by the end of the 1990s. It has also found its way to northern Australia. Neither a vaccine nor a specific drug treatment is yet available. (Epstein)

If we are to reverse these trends, we’ll need to decrease the amounts of greenhouse gasses that are being discharged into our atmosphere.

Change is not easy, and it comes with a high price, especially for business and industry. According to Choo, “Affluent nations like the United States and much of Europe are reluctant to compromise the prosperity they have achieved, while developing countries like China and India don’t want to forgo the economic growth.” Industry leaders balk at the idea of redesigning their products and/or redesigning their machinery in their factories because it would cost them billions of dollars to do so (Evans 4). “Some claim that environmental regulations will make their

businesses unprofitable by driving up prices and production costs, which will in turn force them to close plants and lay off workers, if not shut down entirely” (Evans 4). McKibben reflects our own feelings when he says, “I’ve spent my whole life wanting more, so it’s hard for me to imagine ‘less’ in any but a negative way. But that imagination is what counts. Changing the way we think is at the heart of the question. If it ever happens, the actions will follow” (End 189).

The environmentalists are recommending that we use cleaner sources of energy in order to reduce the carbon dioxide emissions. This would mean a much greater emphasis on the use of wind power and nuclear power, instead of using power from fossil fuels. A previous counsel for the U.S. Department of Energy, Mary Ann Sullivan, warns that we may have to “shift to adaptation strategies rather than reduction strategies” (Choo).

McKibben sees climate change as an “opportunity for us to live happier, more fulfilling lives” (“Happiness” 33). He recites a study from 2005 conducted by the New Economics Foundation that revealed that “the citizens of island nations were counted as both happier and less spendthrift” when compared to the rest of our world (39). In his editorial titled, “Happiness is...,” McKibben argues that the fossil fuels that have provided our grandiose standard of living have led to the privatization of our lives to the extent that we are becoming isolated from family, friends, and neighbors (37). And it is these same fossil fuels that are wreaking havoc with our environment. “We got both more stuff and less happiness,” states McKibben (“Happiness” 37). One begins to wonder if we should look to the Amish community model where individuals produce their own foods, rely on one another and do not rely on fossil fuels and technology to keep things running. Indeed, some, like McKibben, suggest we return to the standards of living we enjoyed in the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when we did not expect to see kiwi fruits in our grocery stores in the dead of winter (“Happiness” 37), and washing machines were not found in every middle class household (End 189-90).

We must remember, “We have not inherited the Earth from our fathers. We are borrowing it from our children. – Native American saying” (qtd in Evans 1). It will not be easy, but if we begin now, we can take steps to make this Earth a healthier place for our children.

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