



Earth Day: Smile, don't shudder

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By Bjorn Lomborg



By Web Bryant, USA TODAY.

Given all the talk of impending catastrophe, this may come as a surprise, but as we approach the 40th anniversary of the first [Earth Day](#), people who care about the environment actually have a lot to celebrate. Of course, that's not how the organizers of Earth Day 2010 see it. In their view (to quote a recent online call to arms), "The world is in greater peril than ever." But consider this: In virtually every developed country, the air is more breathable and the water is more drinkable than it was in 1970. In most of the First World, deforestation has turned to reforestation. Moreover, the percentage of

malnutrition has been reduced, and ever-more people have access to clean water and sanitation.

Apocalyptic predictions from concerned environmental activists are nothing new. Until about 10 years ago, I took it for granted that these predictions were sound. Like many of us, I believed that the world was in a terrible state that was only getting worse with each passing day. My thinking changed only when, as a university lecturer, I set out with my students to disprove what I regarded at the time as the far-fetched notion that global environmental conditions were actually improving.

To our surprise, the data showed us that many key environmental measures were indeed getting better. We also found a disturbing gulf between the chief concerns of rich countries and the problems that actually do the most damage to the world.

If anything, this gulf between perception and reality has gotten wider over the years. For example, one of the "core issues" that the organizers of this year's Earth Day say we should be worrying about is the use of fertilizers and pesticides. It may be unfashionable to point this out, but without the [high-yield agricultural practices](#) developed over the past 60 years, virtually all the forests of the world would have to have been cleared to make way for food production. And starvation would be much, much more prevalent.

Climate change urgency?

Of course, in the minds of Earth Day activists, no environmental challenge is more urgent than the need to drastically cut carbon emissions in order to stop global warming. But is climate change really the No. 1 problem we face?

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be the world's No. 1 environmental killer? In poor countries, 2.5 billion people rely on "biomass" — wood, waste and dung — to cook and keep themselves warm. This year, the resulting pollution will kill about 1.3 million of them, mainly women and children. Switching from biomass to fossil fuels would dramatically improve the lives of more than a third of the world's population. Unfortunately, you're not likely to hear any of this year's Earth Day speakers promoting greater use of fossil fuels in poor countries.

I'm not saying we can blithely ignore global warming. Man-made climate change is real, and we do need to do something about it. But in a world in which most developing countries depend almost exclusively on fossil fuels to power their economies, it's both impractical and immoral to insist that the only solution is for everyone to drastically cut carbon emissions. This approach might make sense if we were able to offer developing countries practical, affordable alternatives to coal and oil. But we cannot— and as long as we can't, all we're really doing when we call for massive carbon cuts is asking the world's poor people to continue living lives of misery and deprivation.

Help the developing world first

So what should we do? Well, to begin with, we might consider one of the fundamental lessons of the past 40 years of environmental concern. You cannot expect people to care about what the environment may be like 100 years from now if they are worrying about whether their children have enough to eat. With this in mind, we should focus on the many more immediate problems faced by the developing world today — problems such as malnutrition, education, disease and clean drinking water. At the same time, we should take meaningful steps to ensure that the future of the developing world will be powered by green energy. As long as the electricity from sustainable sources such as solar panels costs us 10 times as much as electricity generated by coal-fired generators, no one but rich nations will go green (and then only if there are government subsidies). What we need to do is to promote the kind of technological breakthroughs necessary to make solar panels cheaper than fossil fuels. Once we have done that, no one will have to be ordered to give up coal and oil.

Our goal should thus be twofold: first, to confront the most immediate problems facing the Third

World; second, to provide developing countries with the energy technologies they need to create a green, prosperous world. Surprisingly, these goals seem to turn off many in the environmental movement. But while they will use Earth Day to writhe in collective shame at the damage that greedy, gas-guzzling Western consumers are delivering to the fragile planet, the rest of us should celebrate our environmental successes and chart out a reasonable path through the challenges that remain.

Bjorn Lomborg is the director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center at Copenhagen Business School and the author of Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming.

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