



Resolutions To Action

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Earth's Call: Reduce Our Footprint

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EXPERIENCE

Elise Garcia, OP writes, "Like other informed people, I have been aware of global warming for some time. Seeing *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006 raised my level of concern. But the matter moved to the backburner, again, as the unconscionable war in Iraq, the horrors of Darfur, and other pressing issues grabbed my attention. It wasn't until 2007, a month after I made first profession as an Adrian Dominican Sister, that I awakened to the magnitude of the problem.

"An article I read laid out the 'carbon math,' showing why there is only a small window of time left in which to cap and reduce carbon emissions. It explained why failure to act now means condemning us to a 'transformed' world, increasingly uninhabitable—not in some far distant future, but 'within the lifetime of most people reading this article.' Those chilling words sent me seeking verification! It came, decisively, at the end of 2007 from the chairman of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Releasing the panel's final report on climate change,

following a 20-year study involving 2,500 scientists from 130 nations, he said: 'If there's no action before 2012 ... that's too late. What we do in the next two to three years will determine our future. This is the defining moment.'

"The experience of awakening to this terrifying reality came after entering religious life. Did that make a difference, I wondered? Yes. It gave me a path to follow—and hope. At the heart of our lives as religious are two orientations essential to cultivate globally, if we are to avert catastrophe. One is toward the common good; the other is away from unbridled consumption. Individually and collectively, our lives can pattern ways of sustaining life on an imperiled Earth."

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Climate change is essentially irreversible! This is the sobering conclusion in a 2009 scientific study led by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Climate change is caused primarily by global warming resulting from an over-concentration of greenhouse gases being released into the atmosphere. The most abundant of these is carbon dioxide (CO₂) coming primarily from the burning

of fossil fuels such as oil, natural gas, and coal. It persists in the atmosphere for hundreds of years, much longer than other gases. In 1850 atmospheric CO₂ was roughly 280 parts per million (ppm), a level that had not been exceeded in the previous 800,000 years. Scientists believe that the maximum safe level is 350 ppm; today it is 385 ppm and, at the present rate of fossil fuel use, is predicted to reach 450 to 600 ppm by mid-century.

If this peak is allowed, NOAA predicts persistent decreases in dry-season rainfall comparable to the 1930s North American Dust Bowl. The IPCC predicts that expanded deserts would severely compromise food security

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in Africa; by 2020, 250 million people would not have easy access to water. Jim Hansen of NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, one of the world's leading climatologists, testified to Congress in 2008 about the consequences of continued business as usual: melting icecaps and rising sea levels will leave parts of the world uninhabitable, including the east coast of the United States; hundreds of millions of people would become refugees.

In addressing the challenges of climate change, one popular concept is "ecological footprint," which compares human demand with Earth's ecological capacity. Today, North American consumption exceeds Earth's sustainability by 30%. Our ecological footprint averages 3, meaning it would take three more Earths for everyone to live like North Americans.

"Carbon footprint," a subset of ecological footprint, measures the cumulative impact of a person or organization on Earth's resources by examining such things as their energy use in transportation, household electricity, food, clothes, and personal products. The calculation reveals "how many Earths" one's lifestyle is consuming and, by implication, what we are taking from the poor of the world.

Reducing one's carbon footprint calls not only individuals to examine and reduce consumer habits; it also challenges institutional decision-makers including governments and churches to pursue energy policies that reduce carbon emissions. A further strategy to be pursued, both individually and institutionally, after doing everything possible to reduce carbon footprints, is to supplement (not substitute) these endeavors by purchasing carbon offsets or carbon credits from companies who invest that money in projects to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

Reports on climate change, dire as they are, call women religious and all people of faith, to hope and action — to a transformative change of direction that

makes the human presence mutually enhancing for ALL within the sacred Earth community.

REFLECTION

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future...

— Preamble to The Earth Charter

The planet cannot support its human presence unless there is a reciprocal human support for the life systems of the planet.

— Thomas Berry

[W]e invite Catholics and men and women of good will in every walk of life to consider with us the moral issues raised by the environmental crisis...

— US Catholic Bishops

The problems looming on the horizon are immense and time is short.

— Pope Benedict XVI

What is most required at this moment... is moral vision and leadership.

Resources of human character and spirit— love of life, far-sightedness, solidarity— are needed to awaken a sufficient sense of urgency and resolve.

— National Religious Partnership for the Environment

Assisted by the religious authorities of our day, and as reflective women religious, we realize that the questions remain: Are we willing to expand our notion of morality to include an evaluation of our effect on all other living systems? Can we live on this planet in a mutually enhancing way by altering personal and communal lifestyles? Through prayer and contemplation, are we willing to let our present view of ourselves as independent and separate be transformed into the realization that we are indeed one, integrally united to everything that is? Can we truly live who we essentially are?

ACTION

On a regular basis, thousands of Americans begin exercise programs and sound eating habits to lose weight. What if we expanded this health-conscious determination to include our individual and collective carbon footprint?

First, weigh in. Measure your own carbon footprint.

- www.nature.org/initiatives/climatechange/calculator
- www.carbonfootprint.com/calculator.aspx
- www.safeclimate.net/calculator

Next, start an exercise plan.

- Exercise your pen: write letters to editors and congresspersons, create nature poems, send creative "green" ideas to favorite periodicals
- Exercise your voice: help enact strong legislation to cap and reduce carbon emissions and promote Kyoto-like international agreements
- Exercise your imagination: "What if..." "Where could..." What do you think about...?"
- Exercise your senses by becoming immersed in nature's beauty
- Exercise your mind by reading about positive ecological movements
- Exercise your wallet with clean energy investments (see, e.g., www.nativeenergy.com)

Then, reduce the size of your carbon footprint.

- Only run dishwasher when there's a full load. Reduce footprint 100 lbs. per year.
- Use a clothesline instead of a dryer. Reduce footprint 700 lbs a year.
- Put thermostat down 2 degrees in winter and air conditioning up 2 degrees in summer. Reduce footprint by 2000 lbs a year.
- Avoid heavily packaged products. Reduce footprint by 1200 lbs a year.
- Eat less meat. Reduce all the way around!