



ENVIRONMENT

## Why Aren't Americans Heads Over Heels for Our Environment?

**With an economic crisis, foreclosures, and lives lost in Iraq and Afghanistan, our attention has been diverted from key issues like our planet.**

By Tara DePorte / AlterNet October 23, 2008

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In the face of economic crisis, mortgage foreclosures, and lives lost in Iraq and Afghanistan, Americans' attention has been diverted from key issues like our little planet. According to a July 2008 Poll of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, only 59 percent of Americans found the issue of the environment 'very important' in their decision of whom to vote for this fall.

However, much like plummeting stock markets, environmental damages do not self-correct from years of limited oversight and extractive, greed-based policies. What Americans need this coming November is an environmental bailout plan.Â Â

The environment is often dismissed as an intellectual luxury of sorts -- it's nice to think about and enjoy, but rarely applicable to daily lives. The polar bears may be losing their habitat, but I just lost my job is a typical example of this either/or attitude. However, the environment is not in a box off on its own. Its health is fundamental to every component of our daily lives and wellbeing. Risks due to climate change raise home insurance rates; petroleum dependence leads to soaring gas prices and energy dependence; air pollution sickens over 19 million children suffering from asthma (in the US alone); water contamination serves up heavy metals on our dinner tables; and the location of waste transfer stations, power plants and municipal dumps exacerbates racial and socioeconomic tensions.Â

According to 2008 interviews with the League of Conservation Voters (LCV), presidential candidates, Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain agree: Environmental issues don't stand alone. In the interview, Obama stated, "I understand environmental protection to be a great calling on its own. But I also see it as part and parcel of a number of other national priorities, and that elevates its stature even further."

Obama also prioritizes global warming as "not just the greatest environmental challenge facing our planet -- it is one of our greatest challenges of any kind." Unlike McCain, Obama clearly asserts an "inextricable link" between our environment and rising American health care costs, going as far as to say that his administration would address environmental protection as fundamental to disease prevention. Both Obama and McCain see the environment and the economy as closely linked, with McCain admitting that "the nation's economic and environmental interests go hand-in-hand."

With national security topping the McCain ticket, the Senator acknowledges that global warming and energy dependency are key issues within national and global security. McCain also expresses that "the wise and sustainable stewardship of natural resources will continue to be an increasingly crucial factor in protecting the nation's environmental, economic, and physical security."Â

Why Does it Matter What the Presidential Tickets Think?

In the midst of tough times, this presidential election will critically affect how the U.S. addresses environmental issues. Currently, the U.S. lags behind its global counterparts in energy efficiency standards, investment in alternative technology, water conservation, cutting global emissions, and many other key environmental, social and economic issues.

These are not solely local or national issues -- they are issues without geopolitical boundaries, and our choices for national political leadership ripple throughout the world. Past choices have led us to where we are today and today's choices will lead us to the future we choose to create. Legislation and leadership are necessary and Obama and McCain have differing priorities and track records when it comes to the environment. Regardless of which presidential candidate they supported, a September 2008 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press poll showed that 53 percent of Americans think that Obama would do a better job dealing with environmental issues. Â

Public perceptions aside, how do the two candidates stack up when taking action on the environment? In an analysis of environmental voting records, the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) rated Senator McCain 26/100 in lifetime environmental decision making. This contrasted starkly with the pristine 100/100 environmental rating LCV attributed to the decisions of Senator Obama. Â

In terms of on-the-record environmental priorities, both Obama and McCain agree that climate change and energy are top environmental priorities. According to the 2008 LCV interview, Senator Obama ranks combating global warming as a top overall priority of an Obama presidency, saying "Combating global warming will be a top priority of my presidency, and I will attend to it personally."

There are many differences in the approaches to environmental issues in the Obama and McCain presidential tickets. Obama sites low-carbon technology, environmental health, and preservation of natural spaces as key to his ticket's environmental priorities. McCain focuses his priorities around energy independence, water quality and management, and the maintenance of national parks.Â

Why aren't Americans Heads over Heels for Our Environment?

The reality is that Americans deal with our environment everyday, but seldom nurture the relationship. Our indecision and lack of strong, bipartisan action -- in terms of sound environmental policy and inclusive treatment of environmental issues into economic and social policy -- adversely impacts our livelihoods, happiness and overall productivity. So why is it that, faced with the diversity of impacts and risks, Americans continue to discount our environment?

Doom and gloom fatigue: All of us are exhausted with forecasts of economic and environmental Armageddon. However, it's important to understand the critical nature of many of the issues we face. Global climate change, air and water pollution, and other environmental issues are real threats to the fundamental basis of our society. When we look at the flailing economy, do Americans simply say "Oh well, it's just too big of a problem to do anything about?" Just as in any issue, there are no magical solutions to large-scale environmental issues. It is with a "diverse portfolio" of options -- large and small -- some with tried results and some that are more experimental, that we are able to take concrete action on such issues.

It's just too complicated and do they agree? Although scientists are not trained public speakers or politicians, they are key to understanding many of the issues that our society, our nation, and our global community face today.

Unfortunately, scientific communication differs greatly from those in journalism and politics. Scientists work in probabilities, hypotheses and trial-and-error. There are no 100 percent certainties or concrete, promised results in peer-respected scientists' lingo.

Similarly, journalism teaches us to cover all sides of a story to avoid bias, which often results in miscommunication of scientific consensus on critical environmental issues such as global climate

change. We need to both acknowledge the consensus and expertise of our globe's leading scientists and work with trained facilitators -- from the bottom-up and the top-down -- who can put scientific consensus, research and results into political and on-the ground, functioning policy and educational outreach to the American public.

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Too much money: In a recent poll, 36 percent of Americans agree that stricter environmental laws are detrimental to jobs and the economy while 55 percent believe those laws are worth the cost. Similar to debates over the controversial US\$750 billion economic bailout package, post-crises payments towards environmental issues do not get to the root of the problem. Although money is certainly needed to fund a diversity of environmental programs, it is through efficiency of use, allocation, and inclusive management practices associated with natural resource exploitation and the associated impacts that truly address a needy environment.

When investing in the environment, it's important to highlight the savings -- or returns--accrued as a result. In high-cost, high-risk areas such as health care, education, national security, and energy use and production, investment in preventative environmental standards and practices have massive positive impacts.

As an example, if we curb our airborne emissions as defined by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), we also reduce the 14 million lost days of school missed by children in the US suffering from Asthma and the US\$3.2 billion per year we pay in treating childhood asthma. These actions certainly set the stage for successful education programs and equitable health care systems.

The problem will fix itself: Similar to our economic crisis, systems do self-regulate in time. However, are we -- as individuals and as a society -- willing to wait out the storms, as it were? With environmental degradation, most people aren't willing to deal with the consequences of poorly managed resources: pollution, high prices, illness, and death.

The Earth will continue to function, but will it be a world that we're happy with? When, according to the US Center on Disease Control and Prevention over 25 percent of our nation's youth live in areas that regularly exceed the US EPA's limit for ozone -- which is directly related to the burning of fossil fuels -- something has to be done. The question is: Do we want to live in neighborhoods with trash in the streets, high levels of smog and unstable climatic conditions, and pervasive fear of contaminants in our food? Â

Americans need to choose to foster environmental stewardship and responsibility through our ballot boxes. It is up to us to choose economic, social, and environmental long-term sustainability by incorporating environmental responsibility into decision-making. Whether you're a red-stater or a blue-stater, we are all dependent upon natural resources, their health, and their bounty. It is necessary to foster stewardship and ethical use of the resources that we require for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

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