

Combating Climate Change: Why All Should Be Involved

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SUMMARY

It often takes great tragedy to truly unite people. The long-lasting effects of Hurricane Katrina provide the environmental movement with an important opportunity to increase its diversity. The storm and its aftermath should ignite passion for change among everyone. And it is the responsibility of those well-educated in matters of the environment to create a sense of understanding in those who are unfamiliar but eager to learn.

KEY WORDS

Environment, diversity, Katrina, climate change, National Wildlife Federation, Apollo Alliance, alternative energy, environmental movement, education, faith-based communities

In order for us to be successful in the climate change movement and in the promotion of other environmental agendas, it is imperative to include all people. In the past, people of color and people living in poverty have suffered the brunt of poor environmental practices. Now they must be part of the solution. They must be engaged in a way that fosters more inclusive activism, one that reflects the magnitude of the problem and places a demand on policy makers.

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In this way, Hurricane Katrina must be viewed by those in and out of the environmental movement as a call for action. It is through compassion, understanding, education, and our concentrated energies that we must expand the spirit of hope among the people whose lives were devastated by the storm. Further, we must raise our level of activism to help reduce and eliminate those things that contribute to the intensity of such events, and we must make sure that all the people who were directly affected become part of this movement. It is incumbent on all to be a part of preventing another Katrina and its aftermath.

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The causes and consequences of Hurricane Katrina extended far beyond what the mainstream media reported. The short-term impact was visibly obvious; but the longer-term impact and the root-causes of the devastation have gone mostly unseen. Neglect by the government, the enervating effects of bureaucracy, and feeling diminished hope has impacts that can span generations.

The greatest loss to the people of Louisiana affected by Katrina is not only the separation of families but the great loss of a culture. After testifying in Congress on the importance of rebuilding the coast of Louisiana, the jazz great Wynton Marsalis talked about rebuilding the culture of the Louisiana. The only hope of New Orleans regaining its luster is in an effort that reaches across cultural, economic, and racial lines, bringing those elements together to collectively make New Orleans the grand city of its past. Citizens of this great city are now spread across America without reason to return and with very little support in place to embrace their return.

It has been two years since the storm, and yet the recovery has been minimal. Still today, over 100,000 people have not returned and unfortunately many will not. The culture of the city is clearly in its people, and its people are spread across America like a puzzle that's been broken in many pieces, a picture that may never come together again. I can only hope that government on all levels will both appreciate and embrace the idea of a more planned, structured, environmental protection system, and create a city that will be a magnet for cultural rebirth and growth.

It is not surprising that inherent in such devastation is the inspiration for recognizing climate change and implementing better planning. The warm temperatures of the earth have warmed the oceans in areas like the Gulf of Mexico, which is an essential part of my own community in Louisiana. The high water temperatures contributed to the intensity of the storms Wilma and Katrina, which ravaged the coastline. These climatic changes could result in other catastrophic natural events in other communities across the country and they are a direct result of global warming.

We have vulnerable populations in the U.S. – poor people, who are disproportionately impacted and are not equipped to handle the impacts of climate change. There is a recognized lack of involvement by poorer Americans in alleviating the challenges of climate change.

This is not because this segment of the population does not care. Poor peoples' priorities list consist of more basic issues like next month's rent, health care, how to keep their kids off of drugs, and the challenges of crime and drugs in their communities. Global conservation issues are not at the top of their list. But it has been shown that minorities care as much, or more, about the environment than people from higher socio-economic backgrounds (as explained in the Bonta/Jordan piece in this volume). They simply do not possess time or money to address these issues. I've asked many in the "cancer alley" community of Louisiana, "What good is next month's rent if you're dying of cancer as a result of a chemical plant sited adjacent to your property?" We must encourage the poor to reframe or rewrite their priority list, so that a healthy environment is as important to their lives and their children's lives as next month's rent.

It came as no surprise that, as I volunteered in the Katrina recovery centers, people began to ask me questions about the strange weather patterns that resulted in the events of that day. The fact that three major hurricanes collided with our shores within a two-month period of each other raised concerns amongst citizens who in the past showed little interest in global weather patterns. The trauma and displacement altered these individuals' entire realities and they began asking questions about global warming. It is our responsibility as a movement to seize the opportunity to engage a public hungry for making a change. Making connections with interested people is what is needed to make the changes that we in this movement desire. People now want answers to both what causes such intense natural disasters and what we may do in the future to prevent them. Those that have been disproportionately impacted in the past deserve answers today.

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THE SOLUTION

To successfully connect all communities and therefore thoroughly address this problem that is impacting us all, we must establish

common ground. Global warming and climate change is the most galvanizing issue of our time. It has the ability to bring together people from all walks of life because the impacts of this issue are experienced by everyone that inhabits the earth. The sense of urgency around global warming will not only engage, but motivate an immediate call for action that will infuse activism at a time when most involved in the environmental movement are working on many diverse issues.

To engage the poor we must connect to their communities by educating them to take ownership of environmental issues and understand the economic benefit of addressing environmental concerns. The old belief that a clean environment would cost us jobs is no longer prevalent. Today a clean environment can provide good jobs that can stimulate communities at all levels, particularly those communities that have been economically disadvantaged

In order to promote energy conservation in poor communities, we need to make sure that it is affordable and accessible to people in those communities. It's the responsibility of our government to subsidize poor communities and assist them in operating more energy efficiently. Our government spends millions to subsidize corporations in this country annually that operate within our communities; there should be equal opportunity and consideration given to assisting the needs of the poor in reaping the same environmental and economic benefits that are available.

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This calls for a paradigm shift. In the wheel of time, we're reaching a tipping point where environmental damage will change the normal course of everyday life in drastic ways, and we need to construct a future that gets us back on track. To do so we must engage people from all walks of life in the environmental movement through the climate change and conservation windows.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

A twenty-plus year career in the petrochemical industry taught me the true value that exists within the products of the world, but also introduced me to the consequences of the production process. Our country relies on specific and limited sources of energy. The problem with this limited scope is obvious – if it becomes difficult to obtain these sources, the consumer suffers. We must continue our research into alternative types of energy and their implementation in order to combat such situations.

In the 2004 presidential election, presidential candidate John Edwards spoke of two Americas – the “haves” and the “have nots” and he challenged us to fix our problems in a way that does not further exploit the “have nots.” The American public now recognizes the need to diversify our energy portfolio. In addition to strengthening our battle against climate change, decreasing our dependence on fossil fuel and stabilizing our domestic energy politics, we will be making changes that help and unite both Americas.

Using alternative types of energy has a three fold benefit. It reduces our dependency on foreign oil, creates jobs in America by stimulating the economy, and reduces the amount of carbon we release into the atmosphere. The need for alternative energies contributing to a more diversified energy portfolio will only act in the best interest of our economy, our energy security, and our quality of life.

A critical element of the success of the movement is to engage everyone as change agents. If each and every individual would make a personal commitment to increasing their level of participation in an effort to promote change, then change would occur. The ever-growing changes in our climate and environment demand new and innovative approaches in addressing these critical issues. It will require more than just passive conversation. It requires action. We all have contributed to the environmental state that we experience, and we all must contribute to the solution.

Recently, President Bush publicly announced that global warming is real, opening up the issue to debate and enabling us to make connections to people that were previously skeptical but who now want to know what will make a difference. We now have a receptive public, and it is imperative that we educate all people on what they can do to make a difference. Letting people know how small changes, like

changing to florescent light bulbs, riding a bike, and selecting a more efficient car are the types of small things they can do to help make a big difference. This type of knowledge is simple and empowering for all people.

Connecting with children is a high priority and presents a major opportunity to influence change. This movement needs to further educate and expose young people to environmental messages, presenting them with ideas and things to teach their parents. Pumping money into education for children of all ages related to conservation and global warming issues is a prudent measure. Educating kids is the key to educating people. We need to go back to the basics, to really meet them where they are, to help them understand.

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Kids are very disconnected from nature and global issues, and without a global view it's difficult to make global environmental connections. Author of *Last Child in the Woods* Richard Louv refers to this nature-child disconnect as “nature deficit disorder.” A Kaiser Family Foundation study found that the average American child spends 44.5 hours per week (6+ hours per day) in front of an electronic screen.¹

Programs like the National Wildlife Federation’s “The Green Hour” are challenging us to infuse outdoor time into the lives of children. The Green Hour’s theory is that “by giving our children a “Green Hour” a day – a bit of time for unstructured play and interaction with the natural world – we can set them on the path toward physical, mental, and emotional well-being.”² It is necessary for the preservation and future of this movement to change our educational systems so that we can increase youth exposure to environmental ideas and foster a global awareness.

¹ The Kaiser Family Foundation Study. “Media Multi-tasking” Changing the Amount and Nature of Young People’s Media Use.” <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia030905nr.cfm>.

² National Wildlife Federation Website – The Green Hour. <http://www.greenhour.org/section/about>.

Another major opportunity for the movement exists in connecting with faith-based communities. From the environmental perspective, many of these communities recognize that environmental issues are moral issues and believe that we need to take care of the earth. There is interdenominational opportunity for all to be involved. Further, religious communities are a critical player politically and their thoughts on the environment are changing how they think politically. Faith-based organizations are also major supporters of the poor and other marginalized groups of people. We need to leverage the power of their diverse networks to build bridges among many different communities and help construct an expanded movement.

CONCLUSION

The issue of global warming *can* create a platform for collaboration of diverse people and bring the issues of poor people to the table. This is a civil rights issue – fighting for the rights of our people to live in a healthy environment. Reconnecting all communities to nature and providing them with a good reason to be engaged is important.

The biggest obstacle blocking us from moving forward as a movement is the individual's unchanging attitude about how exactly to be successful in this movement. The old guard of leadership of conservation organizations, who are unwilling to advance their way of thinking by embracing issues like diversity, must dissolve. A new generation with a new way of thinking, armed with a vision for positive change, adequate education, and interested in inclusivity must now take the lead.

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True change can only be initiated by true leadership. Those that lead this country and make policies must lead by example and

represent their constituencies by supporting the issues that are in their best interest. Effective leadership is only successful by proactive action. We have, for decades as a country and as an environmental community, been in a reactive mode. Because of the clear sense of urgency related to environmental issues, reactive positioning is both ineffective and inappropriate. We must take positive action and take the lead in responding to these more critical issues in a proactive fashion.

Diversity is important because all that have been impacted must be involved in order for us to handle the large challenge of climate change. It is critical that we entertain the views of all people who are being affected so that we may embrace meaningful solutions that resolve issues that impact us all. Different views, different ideas, different opinions strengthen the movement, and the resiliency of the movement, on these issues.

The next step is to be inclusive and to recognize the call for action. Inclusiveness is making sure there is equal representation of all without leaving any point of view out of the equation. Inclusiveness is being able to respectfully accept the views of others while incorporating your views into the overall endeavor. There must be a call for action that causes all people to react in one accord decisively.

Being a change agent is something we can all do. To be a change agent requires a level of personal commitment and willingness by each individual to have their contribution promote real change. You also must believe that your contribution with others collectively will create greater change. We must focus more on what makes us alike than how we are different, and take those common denominators and focus on how we can use them as catalysts for change. With the strength of numbers, a desire for success, an element of passion, and true commitment, we shall experience success.

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Change is never easy. To see change to its completion will require some failures and discomfort, but it this is how we learn and grow. Our successes we will replicate, our failures we will not repeat. Our failures have greater lessons than our successes and incorporating those lessons into action drives a society to be better. This problem is all of ours, and we should all be part of that solution.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jerome C. Ringo is the immediate past Chair of the Board of Directors of the National Wildlife Federation, the first African-American to hold such a post with a major national conservation organization. His rise to this leadership position followed a unique path, giving him a special understanding about the need to protect wildlife and the communities that depend on it for everyday life. Mr. Ringo is currently the President of the Apollo Alliance, which

works to provide a message of optimism and hope, framed around rejuvenating our nation's economy by creating the next generation of American industrial jobs and treating clean energy as an economic and security mandate to rebuild America.

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