

Ethics Key to Fighting Global Warming

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Do Oregon residents, and Americans in general, have an obligation to reduce their carbon emissions, even at great economic costs, to minimize the impacts of global warming on others? Do we have a duty to pay poor nations for the damage our emissions cause for them?

These and other ethical and moral questions jumped out at me during a presentation made by Dale Jamison, the Wayne Morse Chair of Law and Politics this year at the University of Oregon during a recent campus talk.

Jamison, normally a Professor of Environmental Studies and Philosophy at New York University, told the audience that for more than 100 years scientists have known the risks of adding greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, but humanity has failed to meaningfully address global warming. Worse, he said, we are not likely to see real progress in the future.

The failure of Congress to pass climate protection legislation and the withering expectations for the meeting to be held next month in Copenhagen seem to validate Jamison's perspective.

The key question now, he said, is how we respond to our continued failure.

His message seemed to depress many audience members. The truth is often hard to swallow.

Yet, Jamison didn't leave the audience in complete despair. He closed his presentation with some suggestions for the future. Two of the most important from my perspective were that we must 'expand our consciousness' by considering the affects of our actions on humans and other organisms elsewhere and in the future, and we must revise our ideas of justice and moral responsibility.

These fundamental shifts will require much more than good scientific and economic data. Embedded within the energy, technology, and political issues that dominate today's climate debate are profound ethical and moral questions. How we resolve these issues is likely to determine future domestic and international practices and policies.

For instance, the world population is now approaching 7 billion, but the developed countries, with just twenty percent of the world's population, have contributed more than three quarters of the excess climate-damaging emissions that have accumulated in the atmosphere since the start of the industrial revolution. The U.S. alone has contributed 30 percent of that total.

However, we have yet to be greatly impacted by these emissions. Instead, due to the way the

earth's climate systems function, poor African and Pacific island nations and the Arctic have experienced, and are likely to continue to see, the greatest impacts.

Further, the people that will be most affected by the emissions we generate today—future generations—have no say in what we do.

Do we have an ethical and moral responsibility to remedy this situation?

Think of it this way. How would you feel if someone did something that severely disrupted your ability to live on your property now, and permanently degraded the value of the property you wanted to pass on to your children in the future? I'm sure most people would conclude that the activity was morally wrong.

Would your feelings change if the person responsible for the damage said it cost them too much to stop, and that they could not be held responsible for what happens to your property anyway? Not likely.

To the contrary, most people would seek an immediately halt to the action and demand compensation for the damage it caused. They might even press criminal charges against the perpetrator.

That's how many of the world's poor nations view today's situation. While opponents of climate protection here in the wealthy U.S. claim the costs of emission reductions are too high, the hard hit poor nations of the world believe that the industrialized nations that created today's global warming have a moral responsibility to dramatically cut their emissions.

Poor nations also believe that industrialized nations have a moral responsibility to provide them with the funding and new technologies needed to help them withstand and adapt to climate change.

These equity and social justice issues will be front-and-center at next month's COP 15 meeting. About 50 African nations recently boycotted climate talks in Barcelona to protest what they see as inadequate commitments from industrialized nations to cut emissions. Many are also demanding billions of dollars in reparations for the damage rich nations have caused them.

If the situation were reversed and poor nations were doing something that would forever undermine our wellbeing, we'd be hard pressed to respond differently.

So it's gut check time. Will we accept our ethical and moral responsibility to significantly slash our emissions and to compensate others for the damage we've caused?

It's hard to see how the international community can ever successfully combat global warming until people accept that in today's day and age we are all our brother's keepers.