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## Why global environmental problems entail ethical obligations

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# Climate Ethics

Ethical Analysis of Climate Science and Policy

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## Why Global Environmental Problems Entail Ethical Obligations

By DONALD A BROWN on April 13, 2009 10:43 AM | 6 Comments

**Editor's Note:** *This is a first in a series of posts that will examine the essential ethical character of climate change issues. Later posts will also explain the significance for policy-making of understanding climate change as raising ethical questions. The following article was recently published in Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEA) Bulletin published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development.*

### I. Introduction

Ethics is understood to be the domain of inquiry that explores what is right or wrong, obligatory or non-obligatory, or when responsibility attaches to human behavior. Are there features of global environmental problems that call for classifying them as essentially ethical problems with even greater force than some local or regional environmental problems? If so, what are these features?

Why is this important? If some global environmental problems are essentially ethical problems, then some of the excuses that nations often use to justify not reducing their contributions to the global environmental problems are ethically problematic. This is so because ethical obligations entail duties and responsibilities to others with the result that national policies may not be justified on national interests alone. That is, if there are ethical obligations to others to cease causing harm, then policy options must be responsive to these obligations.

### II. Why Must Some Global and Environmental Problems Be Understood As Ethical Problems?

The features of global environmental problems that strongly call for classification as ethical problems include the following:

#### 1. The Separation Of Causes, Impacts, Harms And Benefits

Some global environmental problems are caused by people in one part of the world but are most harshly experienced by others who are separated from those causing the problem by great space and time. In addition, those most vulnerable to global environmental problems are often least responsible for causing them. Climate change is a strong example of this feature of global environmental problems. Those most vulnerable to climate include many of the poorest people in the world who are among those least responsible for emitting the greenhouse gases that are causing the problem.

The same separation between victim and cause is also true of other global environmental problems, including upper atmospheric ozone depletion, some ocean degradation problems including destruction of global fisheries, some biodiversity and forest problems, and exposure to toxic substances that are deposited around the world by long-range air transport.

In the case of global fisheries depletion, for instance, fishing trawlers from some countries often go great distances to harvest fish for domestic consumption, yet the harshest consequences of depleted global fisheries are often experienced by subsistence fisherman in poor countries far away from the home port of the fishing boats.

This separation of space and time and between cause and impact of course can also happen in more local environmental problems such as water pollution, but the distances between those causing the problem and those who suffer the consequences are most problematic at the global scale because of the magnitude of the distances at this scale.. With the rise in truly global environmental problems in the last few decades, it is now abundantly clear that behavior of people in one part of the world can gravely affect the human health, economic viability and overall welfare of others far away, but their suffering is almost invisible to those who cause the problem.

Several implications for ethical reasoning follow directly from this separation of distance and time



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between cause and effect. First, our intuitive sense of ethical responsibility for harms that we cause others is harder to trigger when those who will be harmed by our action are people we will not ever know and are from a different culture. Yet ethics and morality require us to refrain from harming all others who may suffer because of our behavior even if they are separated from us in time and space.

Secondly, because the actual harm that we are causing to others may be in a particular part of the world that is uniquely vulnerable to global environmental change but is unknown to us, we not only don't know the people we are harming but have no idea where the locus of the worst harm is located. For instance, particularly vulnerable villages to climate change impacts may turn on the geographical features where the village is located such as dependence on glacier water flows in the summer coupled with vulnerability to monsoon irregularities. Yet few of us know where these places are. And so in the case of global environmental problems we may be causing great harm to others who we not only do not know personally, but about whom we neither have an idea of their location nor why they are particularly vulnerable to actions we are taking. For this reason, global scale environmental problems create a huge challenge to trigger our sense of ethical responsibility, yet ethics requires us to not harm others through our actions none the less.

A related reason why the global environmental problems demand classification as ethical problems stems from the fact that some actions that cause some environmental damage are often justified on the basis of cost-benefit analysis. Yet this justification is ethically problematic when those who benefit from an action that causes harm have no relation with those who are harmed. For instance, government may tolerate inevitable pollution from a land fill by identifying the benefits that citizens receive by having a place to take their garbage. But in the case of global environmental problems, those who are harmed by actions do not enjoy the benefits that come from taking the action. A harms-benefits justification for environmental degradation, if ethically justifiable at all, only works where those who will suffer the harms and those who benefit from the action that causes the harm are in the same community of interests. In the case of global environmental problems, those who are harmed are rarely made better by the benefits of the action that cause the harm.

## *2. The Consequences of Global Environmental Problems Are Often Catastrophic to Many.*

The second reason why global environmental problems call for classification as ethical problems stems from the fact that their consequences are often catastrophic to those who are most harmed by them. Climate change, for instance, directly threatens human life and health and resources to sustain life as well as species of plants and animals and ecosystems around the world. The harms include deaths from disease, droughts, floods, heat and intense storms and damage to homes and villages from rising oceans and intense storms, adverse impacts on agriculture, social disputes caused by diminishing natural resources, sickness from a variety of diseases, the inability to rely upon traditional sources of food, the destruction of water supplies, and the inability to live where one has lived to sustain life. In addition, the very existence of some small island nations is threatened by climate change caused sea level rise. Clearly these impacts are catastrophic for some.

Loss of global fisheries can be devastating to substance fishermen, global desertification and drought are likely to cause mass starvation, loss of atmospheric ozone can cause skin cancer in millions, and long-range transport of persistent organic chemicals can cause deadly diseases and birth defects. Because ethics requires people to be particularly careful to not to harm others when the harm is great, global environmental problems need to be seen as ethical issues.

## *3. The Governments That People Rely Upon To Protect Their Interests Don't Match The Scale Of Global Environmental Problems.*

Governments are expected to protect their citizens from life-threatening dangers. At the local, regional or national scale, citizens can petition their governments to protect them from environmental harms. But at the global level, no government exists whose jurisdiction matches the scale of global environmental problems. And so, although existing national, regional and local governments have jurisdiction over activities within their boundaries coupled to responsibilities to their citizens, they have no responsibility to those outside their borders in the absence of binding international law. For this reason, ethical appeals to get governments to require that their citizens not harm non-citizens in other nations are necessary to prompt action.

In fact, according to a leading foreign policy theory called "realism," national governments should limit the scope of their international engagements to the pursuit of national interest alone. According to some "realist" proponents, governments should refrain from acting at the international level for ethical reasons that do not coincide with national interests. Yet global environmental problems require people in one part of the world to consider the interests of others outside the jurisdiction of their national governments. Because there is no duty of national governments to protect foreigners from global environmental problems unless they bind themselves voluntarily in treaties, an appeal to ethical and moral responsibility is particularly important to motivate national actions in regard to global scale environmental problems. Moreover, if global environmental problems actually create ethical obligations, they have ethical duties to mitigate global environmental problems.

### **By:**

Donald A. Brown  
Associate Professor, Environmental Ethics, Science, and Law

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jamesthompson23 commented on [Why Global Environmental Problems Entail Ethical Obligations](#): Very great

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The Pennsylvania State University  
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**6 COMMENTS**

[jamesthompson23](#) | April 27, 2009 7:26 PM | [Reply](#)

Very great points, Donald. I look forward to hearing more of your ideas in another post. Thank you.

[mstrong661](#) | May 1, 2009 11:39 PM | [Reply](#)

MYTH 1

THE WORLD IS WARMING

Wrong. It is true the world did warm between 1975 and 1998, but even Professor David Karoly, one of our leading alarmists, admitted this week "temperatures have dropped" since - "both in surface temperatures and in atmospheric temperatures measured from satellites". In fact, the fall in temperatures from just 2002 has already wiped out half the warming our planet experienced last century. (Check data from Britain's Hadley Centre, NASA's Aqua satellite and the US National Climatic Data Centre.)

Some experts, such as Karoly, claim this proves nothing and the world will soon start warming again. Others, such as Professor Ian Plimer of Adelaide University, point out that so many years of cooling already contradict the theory that man's rapidly increasing gases must drive up temperatures ever faster.

But that's all theory. The question I've asked is: What signs can you actually see of the man-made warming that the alarmists predicted?

[ Ian Plimer, Temperature trends]

MYTH 2

THE POLAR CAPS ARE MELTING

Wrong. The British Antarctic Survey, working with NASA, last week confirmed ice around Antarctica has grown 100,000 sq km each decade for the past 30 years.

Long-term monitoring by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reports the same: southern hemisphere ice has been expanding for decades.

As for the Arctic, wrong again.

The Arctic ice cap shrank badly two summers ago after years of steady decline, but has since largely recovered. Satellite data from NASA's Marshall Space Flight Centre this week shows the Arctic hasn't had this much April ice for at least seven years.

Norway's Nansen Environmental and Remote Sensing Centre says the ice is now within the standard deviation range for 1979 to 2007.

[Antarctic Ice Growth, Arctic Ice Recovery]

MYTH 3

WE'VE NEVER HAD SUCH A BAD DROUGHT

Wrong. A study released this month by the University of NSW Climate Change Research Centre confirms not only that we've had worse droughts, but this Big Dry is not caused by "global warming", whether man-made or not.

As the university's press release says: "The causes of southeastern Australia's longest, most severe and damaging droughts have been discovered, with the surprise finding that they originate far away in the Indian Ocean.

"A team of Australian scientists has detailed for the first time how a phenomenon known as the Indian Ocean Dipole - a variable and irregular cycle of warming and cooling of ocean water - dictates whether moisture-bearing winds are carried across the southern half of Australia."

MYTH 4

OUR CITIES HAVE NEVER BEEN HOTTER

Wrong. The alleged "record" temperature Melbourne set in January - 46.4 degrees - was in fact topped by the 47.2 degrees the city recorded in 1851. (See the Argus newspaper of February 8, 1851.)

And here's another curious thing: Despite all this warming we're alleged to have caused, Victoria's highest temperature on record remains the 50.7 degrees that hit Mildura 103 years ago.

South Australia's hottest day is still the 50.7 degrees Oodnadatta suffered 37 years ago.

NSW's high is still the 50 degrees recorded 70 years ago.

What's more, not one of the world's seven continents has set a record high temperature since 1974. Europe's high remains the 50 degrees measured in Spain 128 years ago, before the invention of the first true car.

MYTH 5

THE SEAS ARE GETTING HOTTER

Wrong. If anything, the seas are getting colder. For five years, a network of 3175 automated bathythermographs has been deployed in the oceans by the Argo program, a collaboration

between 50 agencies from 26 countries.

Warming believer Josh Willis, of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, reluctantly concluded:

"There has been a very slight cooling . . ."

[Ocean cooling]

MYTH 6

THE SEAS ARE RISING

Wrong. For almost three years, the seas have stopped rising, according to the Jason-1 satellite mission monitored by the University of Colorado.

That said, the seas have risen steadily and slowly for the past 10,000 years through natural warming, and will almost certainly resume soon.

But there is little sign of any accelerated rises, even off Tuvalu or the Maldives, islands often said to be most threatened with drowning.

Professor Nils-Axel Moerner, one of the world's most famous experts on sea levels, has studied the Maldives in particular and concluded there has been no net rise there for 1250 years.

Venice is still above water.

[Sea Level in the Maldives, Sea Level satellite data]

MYTH 7

CYCLONES ARE GETTING WORSE

Wrong. Ryan Maue of Florida State University recently measured the frequency, intensity and duration of all hurricanes and cyclones to compile an Accumulated Cyclone Energy Index.

His findings? The energy index is at its lowest level for more than 30 years.

The World Meteorological Organisation, in its latest statement on cyclones, said it was impossible to say if they were affected by man's gases: "Though there is evidence both for and against the existence of a detectable anthropogenic signal in the tropical cyclone climate record to date, no firm conclusion can be made on this point."

[Ryan Maue and Hurricane energy, Hurricane landfall trends]

MYTH 8

THE GREAT BARRIER REEF IS DYING

Wrong. Yes, in 1999, Professor Ove Hoegh-Gulberg, our leading reef alarmist and administrator of more than \$30 million in warming grants, did claim the reef was threatened by warming, and much had turned white.

But he then had to admit it had made a "surprising" recovery.

Yes, in 2006 he again warned high temperatures meant "between 30 and 40 per cent of coral on Queensland's Great Barrier Reef could die within a month".

But he later admitted this bleaching had "minimal impact". Yes, in 2007 he again warned that temperature changes of the kind caused by global warming were bleaching the reef.

But this month fellow Queensland University researchers admitted in a study that reef coral had once more made a "spectacular recovery", with "abundant corals re-established in a single year". The reef is blooming.

MYTH 9

OUR SNOW SEASONS ARE SHORTER

Wrong. Poor snow falls in 2003 set off a rash of headlines predicting warming doom. The CSIRO typically fed the hysteria by claiming global warming would strip resorts of up to a quarter of their snow by 2018.

Yet the past two years have been bumper seasons for Victoria's snow resorts, and this year could be just as good, with snow already falling in NSW and Victoria this past week.

[New low temp record at Australian ski resort this year]

MYTH 10

TSUNAMIS AND OTHER DISASTERS ARE GETTING WORSE

Are you insane? Tsunamis are in fact caused by earthquakes. Yet there was World Vision boss Tim Costello last week, claiming that Asia was a "region, thanks to climate change, that has far more cyclones, tsunamis, droughts".

Wrong, wrong and wrong, Tim. But what do facts matter now to a warming evangelist when the cause is so just?

And so any disaster is now blamed on man-made warming the way they once were on Satan. See for yourself on [www.numberwatch.co.uk/warmlist.htm](http://www.numberwatch.co.uk/warmlist.htm) the full list, including kidney stones, volcanic eruptions, lousy wine, insomnia, bad tempers, Vampire moths and bubonic plagues. Nothing is too far-fetched to be seized upon by carpetbaggers and wild preachers as signs of a warming we can't actually see.

Not for nothing are polar bears the perfect symbol of this faith - bears said to be threatened by warming, when their numbers have in fact increased.

Bottom line: fewer people now die from extreme weather events, whether cyclones, floods or blinding heatwaves.

Read that in a study by Indur Goklany, who represented the US at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: "There is no signal in the mortality data to indicate increases in the overall frequencies or severities of extreme weather events, despite large increases in the population at risk."

[Going down - death rates due to extreme weather events]

So stop this crazy panic.

First step: check again your list of the signs you thought you saw of global warming. How many are true? What do you think, and why do you think it?

Yes, the world may resume warming in one year or 100. But it hasn't been warming as the alarmists said it must if man were to blame, and certainly not as the media breathlessly keeps

claiming.

Best we all just settle down, then, and wait for the proof — the real proof. After all, panicking over invisible things is so undignified, don't you think?

thepants | May 3, 2009 6:29 PM | Reply

This article brings up an important point about the use of the cost-benefit model in regards to global environmental problems. For the cost-benefit model to be a justification for actions that lead to climate change and other environmental damage, all those who stand to be affected must be aware of the risk of harm and consent to take it on in exchange for reaping the benefits. In the case where actions carried out in one part of the world lead to environmental degradation in another, those assuming the costs have had no say in the matter, and certainly aren't reaping any benefits. This is why it is essential to use a different set of criteria when making decisions that could impact the global environment. Only when global environmental issues are evaluated from an ethical standpoint, and not merely an economic standpoint, will environmental justice be achieved.

dbaker | May 4, 2009 9:48 PM | Reply

Ethics has not been high on the environmental agenda due to the fact that funding has taken top priority over solutions. The professional whiners see solutions as a threat to future income.

Dennis Baker

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RE : The solution to climate change.

( human excrement + nuclear waste = hydrogen )

The USA discharges Trillions of tons of sewage annually, sufficient quantity to sustain electrical generation requirements of the USA.

Redirecting existing sewage systems to containment facilities would be a considerable infrastructure modification project.

It is the intense radiation that causes the conversion of organic material into hydrogen, therefore what some would consider the most dangerous waste because of its radiation would be the best for this utilization.

I believe the combination of clean water and clean air, will increase the life expectance of humans.

yours sincerely

Dennis Baker

Netta Manning

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25/04/2009

Dennis Baker

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This is a formal complaint of Election rigging by the RCMP. Greater/ corroborative/ illegal details are available. The 3 days available after release on bail was insufficient to complete the prerequisites of elections bc to becoming a candidate. The present 9 pm curfew prevents me from attending election events in Vancouver, keeping this covered up.

This is a copy of what entered the Globe and Mail <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20090423.WBcampbellblog20090423160612/WBStory/WBcampbellblog/#commentLatest>

You (dennis baker, from penticton, Canada) wrote: Voter turn out is simply a recognition that citizens feel that voting is a waste of time, as the outcomes are predetermined. I have been a Candidate in a Federal election and a municipal election, and a provincial election was in order for me.becoming a candidate€

From: dennis baker (dennisbaker2003@hotmail.com) Sent: April 15, 2009 6:50:49 AM To: electionsbc@elections.bc.ca What ?where? how much?! am thinking about running as a candidate.dennis baker--

The response was to be arrested and charged with possession for the purpose of trafficking. For some alleged drugs in a vehicle that I was a passenger. The owner / driver was not charged. I was released after 5 days, on 500 cash bail.I am offering every media outlet to finance the POLYGRAPH which I willing submit to and then expose this to the public.Dennis Baker

Posted 25/04/09 at 11:32 AM EDT | Alert an Editor | Link to Comment

I do know the Green Party attempted to have me arrested previously when a candidate in a Federal Election, so you might find answers with that organization.

Dennis Baker

Asteroid Miner | May 16, 2009 2:33 AM | Reply

Cost-benefit analysis, as all economics applied to the impending EXTINCTION of Homo Sapiens, is nonsense.

Economics presupposes the existence of a stable civilization and the invention of money. A stable civilization with money requires creatures that are at least marginally rational and intelligent and slightly knowledgeable. A stable civilization also requires an adequate food supply. The collapse of agriculture inevitably leads to the collapse of civilization and the collapse of money and economics. Economics is unable to go outside of its founding presuppositions. Global warming climatology MUST concern itself with the probable collapse of agriculture and civilization and the possible extinction of the supposedly rational intelligent knowledgeable creatures. Climate change is therefore impossible for economists to deal with. Cost-benefit analysis of the extinction of Homo Sapiens is nonsense.

The extinction of Homo Sapiens would be an infinite cost. Economics cannot deal with infinite costs. The fall of civilization, if it, by some miracle, does not result in extinction this time, is a trans-finite cost. Economics cannot deal with trans-finite numbers any more than it can deal with infinite cost. Cost-benefit analysis of the fall of civilization is nonsense.

References:

October 2006 Scientific American

"EARTH SCIENCE

Impact from the Deep

Strangling heat and gases emanating from the earth and sea, not asteroids, most likely caused several ancient mass extinctions. Could the same killer-greenhouse conditions build once again? By Peter D. Ward

downloaded from:

<http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?articleID=00037A5D-A938-150E-A93883414B7F0000&sc=1100322>

.....Most of the article omitted.....

But with atmospheric carbon climbing at an annual rate of 2 ppm and expected to accelerate to 3 ppm, levels could approach 900 ppm by the end of the next century, and conditions that bring about the beginnings of ocean anoxia may be in place. How soon after that could there be a new greenhouse extinction? That is something our society should never find out."

Press Release

Pennsylvania State University

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE Monday, Nov. 3, 2003

downloaded from:

<http://www.geosociety.org/meetings/2003/prPennStateKump.htm>

"In the end-Permian, as the levels of atmospheric oxygen fell and the levels of hydrogen sulfide and carbon dioxide rose, the upper levels of the oceans could have become rich in hydrogen sulfide catastrophically. This would kill most of the oceanic plants and animals. The hydrogen sulfide dispersing in the atmosphere would kill most terrestrial life."

www.astrobio.net is a NASA web zine. See:

<http://www.astrobio.net/news/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=672>

<http://www.astrobio.net/news/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=1535>

<http://www.astrobio.net/news/article2509.html>

<http://astrobio.net/news/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=2429&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0>

These articles agree with the first 2. They all say 6 degrees C or 1000 parts per million CO2 is the extinction point.

The global warming is already 1.3 degree Farenheit. 11 degrees Farenheit is about 6 degrees Celsius. The book "Six Degrees" by Mark Lynas agrees. If the global warming is 6 degrees centigrade, we humans go extinct. See:

<http://www.marklynas.org/2007/4/23/six-steps-to-hell-summary-of-six-degrees-as-published-in-the-guardian>

"Under a Green Sky" by Peter D. Ward, Ph.D., 2007. Paleontologist discusses mass extinctions of the past and the one we are doing to ourselves.

OIL SHALE, TAR SANDS AND COAL MUST BE LEFT IN THE GROUND TO AVOID THE EXTINCTION OF US HUMANS.

We have to convert to plug-in hybrid cars so that electricity made by low-CO2 methods powers most of our driving. Nuclear power produces the least CO2 of ANY source of electricity.

32 countries have nuclear power plants. Only 9 have the bomb. The top 4 producers of CO2 all have nuclear power plants, coal fired power plants and nuclear bombs. They are the USA, China, India and Russia. Reducing

CO2 production by 90% by 2050 requires drastic action in the USA, China, India and Russia. Coal, oil shale and tar sands must be left untouched in the ground.

I have no connection to the nuclear power industry.

Will7 | August 4, 2010 11:30 AM | Reply

No matter what, I stand by my principle which I believe that the environmental impact that we created as a result of development and destruction of natural forest draw a clear and defined boundary on ethical problems. Imagine losing the rights to breathe clean air, clean water, the natural views are all no longer there. In the namesake of providing more jobs and helping a nation grow and population enjoying better lifestyle? I don't think so.

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