

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Breathe Easier

Today, April 22, is Earth Day, which has been marked each year since 1970 as a day of reflection on the state of the environment. At least that's the idea, so let's begin with some figures.

Since 1970, carbon monoxide emissions in the U.S. are down 55%, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Particulate emissions are down nearly 80% and sulfur dioxide emissions have been reduced by half. Lead emissions have declined more than 98%. All of this has been accomplished despite a doubling of the number of cars on the road and a near-tripling of the number of miles driven, according to Steven Hayward of the Pacific Research Institute.

Mr. Hayward compiles the "Index of Leading Environmental Indicators" published around Earth Day each year by PRI and the

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American Enterprise Institute. It serves as an instructive antidote for the doom and gloom that normally pervades environmental coverage, especially of late.

This year, for example, Vanity Fair has inaugurated an "Earth Issue," comprising 246 glossy, non-recycled pages of fashion ads, celebrity worship and environmental apocalypse. Highlights include computer-generated images of New York City under water and the Washington mall as one big reflecting pool. The magazine also includes a *breathless* essay by U.S. environmental conscience-in-chief Al Gore. The message is that we are headed for an environmental catastrophe of the first order, and only drastic changes to the way we live can possibly prevent it.

If arguments were won through the use of italics, Mr. Gore would prevail in a knock-out. But as Mr. Hayward notes in his "Index," the environmental movement as a whole has developed a credibility problem since the first Earth Day 36 years ago. In the 1970s, prominent greens were issuing dire predictions about mass starvation, overpopulation and—of all things—global cooling. Since then, population-growth estimates have come way down, biotechnology advances have found ways to feed more people than the doomsayers believed possible, and the global-cooling crisis has become the global-warming crisis without missing a beat.

There's no doubt the greens have succeeded in promoting higher environmental standards, which in turn have contributed to cleaner air, water and land almost everywhere you look. Today, game fish have returned to countless American streams and lakes, the Northeast has more forestland than at any time since the 19th century and smog is down dramatically in places like Los Angeles. But environmental activists don't want to believe their own success, much less advertise it. They need another looming catastrophe to stay relevant, not to mention to keep raising money.

Thus the cause of global warming has come

at a fortuitous moment for clean-air warriors looking for alarms to ring. It is global in scope, will take decades to come to fruition—or to be revealed as another false alarm—and provides endless opportunities for government intrusion into the economy. It is, if you'll pardon the deliberate reference to a faith-based phenomenon, the green equivalent of manna from heaven. Or would be, if the greens hadn't spent so much time over the last three decades talking up scares that never came to pass.

This credibility deficit, combined with the slow-motion nature of the putative warming, has led to some desperate tactics by the global-warming true believers. To cite just one example, careful expounders of the idea of human-caused global warming used to take pains to distinguish between "climate" and "weather." Thus, snow storms in April or cold snaps in September were merely "weather" and told us nothing about long-term trends.

Then Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, and the environmental movement pounced. The image of an American city filled with water proved irresistible to those who have been warning for years about rising sea levels—never mind that the cause was one unusually powerful storm and that New Orleans was built below sea level in the first place. As Mr. Gore puts it, Katrina "may have been the first sip of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us over and over again until we act on the truth we have wished would go away." If that language sounds familiar, that's because Mr. Gore borrowed the image from Winston Churchill, who used it to describe the Nazi menace in Europe in the 1930s.

The comparison between global-warming skeptics and Nazis or their sympathizers is not an idle one, as full-scale demonization of anyone who questions the global warming orthodoxy is now under way. MIT's Richard Lindzen recently described in these pages how this intimidation is stifling scientific debate.

A separate article in the same issue of Vanity Fair compares anyone who doubts that the apocalypse is nigh (including us) to the tobacco-industry shills who denied the link between cancer and smoking. It also suggests that both are the products of the same bought-and-paid-for industry flacks. You can expect to hear more such comparisons going forward; having lost the debate over Kyoto, certain greens would now rather not debate the evidence at all and merely invoke some "consensus" that everyone allegedly knows to be true.

As optimists by nature, we're inclined instead to observe the happy environmental progress of recent decades; that this is in part the result of prosperity produced by economic growth; and that the solutions to any future environmental danger are also likely to emerge from the new technology and greater wealth produced by free markets and free people. So next time someone tells you that climate change is more dangerous than terrorism, bear in mind something else Churchill once said: "A fanatic is one who can't change his mind and won't change the subject."

*The world is getting cleaner,
Al Gore notwithstanding.*