

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by

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Why Are We Not Paying Attention to the Environment?

As we are learning from the media, there are many problems in this world. A recent earthquake in Nepal killed over 6,000 people, terrorism continues in Syria, economic problems in Greece can't seem to get resolved, and unrest in Baltimore, Maryland are just a few of the recent problems. In each of these cases, the number of people impacted is a very small percentage of the world population. But there is another problem that can impact every living creature on this earth – that of the deteriorating environment.

We are consuming the natural resources faster than the earth can regenerate them. According to the Redefining Progress, in 1960 we were consuming about 50% of the regenerative resources while in 1980 we were consuming 100%. Today, we need over one and a half earths to satisfy our requirements, and at the rate we are going, we will need two earths by 2030 to satisfy our needs. We are not doing enough to curb this increase in consumption.

In 1992, about 200 countries gathered in Rio de Janeiro to discuss global warming. They met again five years later in Kyoto, Japan to develop the Kyoto Protocol which established targets for reducing carbon emissions. One of the targets was to reduce emissions by 5% within 15 years. So what did we accomplish by 2012? Instead, we increased emissions by 58% with only one country, Germany, meeting its reduction target. The U.S. was the only country not to ratify that treaty.

What may be the most crucial environmental issue is that of the availability and quality of water. Of all the water on this earth, only 0.01% is fresh water and available to us as surface water. Of this amount, about 60% is needed for agricultural use, 30% for industrial use and just 10% for human consumption. In addition to many water shortages throughout the world, there are about 30 states in the U.S. that are facing the same problem. California is experiencing a drought, and Alabama, Georgia and Florida are fighting in the courts for water rights. We are being very wasteful, particularly in the northeast quadrant of the U.S. where we are spoiled – living next to the Great Lakes which provide 20% of all the available fresh water on the earth.

Another issue that contributes to many other environmental problems is that of population growth. Going back to the year 1 A.D, the world population was estimated to be about 150 million people. It took another 1880 years to reach one billion people on the earth, but only about 60 years for second billion. Just in the last 75 years the population has gone from about two billion people to close to eight billion, and we are adding about 10 million people to

the world population every six weeks. This geometric growth is fueling most of the environmental problems.

As a country we are not doing our share to curb the deterioration of the planet earth. The U.S. has attended all the global conferences on climate change, but the only result has been talking about what needs to be done. We should look at what some of the EU countries are doing to fight this problem. They have invested greatly in renewable energy like wind and solar, and they are converting most of the coal-fired power plants to wood pellets produced from sustainably grown forests. Even at the state level, we are falling short. For example, two high school students in Oregon have filed suit against the governor of Oregon for not doing enough relative to climate change for the benefit of future generations. Illinois is working toward meeting its Renewable Portfolio Standard, but little is being proposed to mitigate the other environmental issues.

At the city level, some cities in the west are moving forward quickly. For example, Seattle will fine its residents if they mix more than 10% food waste with their trash as all food waste should be composted. A recent report by NerdWallet looked at environmental quality, transportation, energy sources and housing density to rank the 25 greenest cities in the U.S. Without knowing the creditability of the organization conducting this study, it is still disappointing and embarrassing that Chicago did not even make the top 25 cities in the U.S. Perhaps the Chicago administration has bigger issues such as the financial situation of the city, the CPS, the Obama library, and homicides that dealing with the environment can come later – but later may be too late.

A recycling program was started about 20 years ago with the construction of four sorting centers, but they still can't get the program working to its planned design. A unique small wind turbine that was designed to generate 45% more electricity was installed on the lake front to confirm its efficiency but was taken down four months later because of its undesirable esthetics. About nine years ago a proposal was submitted by Illinois Institute of Technology to the Chicago Park District to implement new technologies on Northerly Island so it could be totally energy independent and carbon emission free. Renewable energy could be used to produce hydrogen from Lake Michigan water which would then be combined with fuel cells to power all motors on the island such as tractors, buses, and lawn mowers. The island could be an example of what life should look like in about 20 years. But again, for some reason this proposal was rejected. At least the park district is now implementing another proposal to make better use of the island.

While the City of Chicago tries to become more environmental, it should also consider providing an incentive for all the small, medium and large companies in the Chicagoland area to implement sustainability strategies in their operations, something all cities should be doing. Most large companies have appointed a Chief Sustainability Officer, or comparable position, to lead that initiative, but how effective can that position be if the person has not been trained properly. Or even if the sustainability director has the proper training, how effective can s/he be

if no one else in the company understands the concept. Sustainability should not be the responsibility of a person or department, but rather should be imbedded into the culture of the company. Everyone should have some understanding of the concept in order to work together and achieve the environmental objectives. Where can this understanding be obtained? There are many universities in the major U.S. cities that offer sustainability programs or courses, or better yet, bring a qualified trainer to the company.

For the sake of our grandchildren and future generations, we must move forward quickly to mitigate this problem that is affecting every living creature in the world.