

# You're Getting Warmer

## Ten years after Kyoto, the U.S. has done nothing

By Bill McKibben

**T**he Kyoto Accord began the race to halt global warming. On its 10th anniversary, why are we barely past the starting gate?

I remember so well the final morning hours of the Kyoto conference. The negotiations had gone on long past their scheduled evening close, and the convention-center management was frantic — a trade show for children's clothing was about to begin, and every corner of the vast hall still was littered with the carcasses of the sleeping diplomats who had gathered in Japan to draw up a first-ever global treaty to curb greenhouse-gas emissions. But when word finally came that an agreement had been reached, people roused themselves with real enthusiasm — lots of backslapping and hugs.

A long decade after the first powerful warnings had sounded, it seemed that humans were finally rising to the greatest challenge we'd ever faced.

The only long face in the hall belonged to William O'Keefe, chairman of the Global Climate Coalition, otherwise known as the American coal, oil and car lobby. He'd spent the week coordinating the resistance — working with Arab delegates and Russian industrialists to sabotage the emerging plan. And he'd failed. "It's in free fall now," he said, stricken. But then he straightened his shoulders and said, "I can't wait to get back to Washington where we can get things under control."

I thought he was whistling past the graveyard. In fact, he knew far better than the rest of us what the future would hold. He knew it would be at least another decade before anything changed.

### Ten Years Warmer

The important physical-world reality to know about the 10 years after Kyoto is that they included the warmest years on record. All of the warmest years on record.

***The political-world reality 10 years after Kyoto is that we haven't done anything. Oh, we've passed all kinds of interesting state and local laws. ... But in Washington, D.C., nothing. No laws at all.***

In that span of time, we've come to understand that not only is the globe warming, but also that we'd dramatically underestimated the speed and the size of that warming. By now, the data from the planet outstrips the scientific prediction on an almost daily basis. Earlier this fall, for instance, the melt of Arctic sea ice beat the old record. Beat it in mid-August, and then the ice kept melting for six more weeks, losing an area the size of California every week. "Arctic Melt Unnerves the Experts," the headline in *The New York Times* reported. And they were shaken by rapid changes in tundra-permafrost systems, not to mention rain-forest systems, temperate-soil carbon-sequestration systems, oceanic-acidity systems.

We've gone from a problem for our children to a problem for right about now, as evidenced by, oh, Hurricane Katrina, California wildfires, epic droughts in the Southeast and Southwest. And that's just the continental U.S. Go to Australia sometime: It's gotten so dry there that native Aussie Rupert Murdoch recently announced that his News Corp. empire was going carbon neutral.

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Oh, we've passed all kinds of interesting state and local laws, wonderful experiments that have begun to show just how much progress is possible. But in Washington, D.C., nothing. No laws at all.

Until last year, when the GOP surrendered control of Congress, even the hearings were a joke, with "witnesses" like novelist Michael Crichton.

And as a result, our emissions have continued to increase. Worse, we've made not the slightest attempt to shift China and India away from using their coal. Instead of an all-out effort to provide the resources so they could go renewable, we've stood quietly by and watched from the sidelines as their energy trajectories shot out of control: The Chinese now are opening a new coal-fired plant every week. History will regard even the horror in Iraq as one more predictable folly next to this novel burst of irresponsibility.

### A Hint of a Movement

If you're looking for good news, there is some.

For one thing, we understand the technologies and the changes in habit that can help. The last 10 years have seen the advent of hybrid cars and the widespread use of compact fluorescent light bulbs. Wind power has been the fastest-growing source of electric generation throughout the period. Japan and then Germany have pioneered with great success the subsidy scheme required to put millions of solar panels up on rooftops.

Even more important, a real movement has begun to emerge in this country. It began with Katrina, which opened eyes. Al Gore gave those eyes something to look at: His movie made millions realize just what a pickle we were in. Many of those, in turn, became political activists. Earlier this year, six college students and I launched [stepitup07.org](http://stepitup07.org), which has organized almost 2,000 demonstrations in all 50 states. Last month, the student climate movement drew 7,000 hardworking kids from campuses all over the country for a huge conference. We've launched a new grassroots coalition, [lsky.org](http://lsky.org), that will push both Congress and the big Washington environmental groups.

All this work has tilted public opinion — new polls actually show energy and climate change showing up high on the list of issues that voters care about, which in turn has made the candidates take notice. All the Democrats are saying more or less the right things, though none of them, save John Edwards, is saying them with much volume.

### The Race of All Time

Now it's a numbers game. Can we turn that political energy into change fast enough to matter?

On the domestic front, the numbers look like this: We've got to commit to reductions in carbon emissions of 80 percent by 2050, and we've got to get those

