

LEADERSHIP: REINVENTING THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

The Challenge of Global Sustainability

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After last week's events, I, like I am sure all of you, have had to go back to the basics of who we are and what we are doing, why we are doing it, and whether it has significance. Where have these events of September 11th taken us?

I am a New Yorker. I witnessed the attack on the World Trade Center from the street and then from my office on lower Fifth Avenue. I, with my colleagues, saw the same horrors that you have all seen. Some of you perhaps saw it live as did I, others on CNN and in the papers. The tremendous loss—of life, of a sense of security, and of normalcy—has profoundly affected all of us in ways that are still unfolding.

In the days immediately following, many of us could not imagine getting back to our day-to-day work. Still, at NRDC, like probably all other organizations and businesses around the city and around the country, we needed to quickly regroup and consider how to move forward. On Thursday, September 13th, we came to a full stop and began the process of considering thoughtfully where

our work of environmental advocacy fits into the new political and emotional climate in the United States.

Just to digress a bit, NRDC is a national environmental advocacy organization that uses a combination of legal, scientific, and technical expertise, litigation, media, lobbying, and grassroots support from 500,000 members to reach decision makers in government and in business. Our tactics are targeted, direct and pragmatic, and over the last eight months we have been vocal in our opposition to the environmental policies of the Bush administration. We have advertised widely and use direct mail as a major communication and education vehicle with our half million members and prospective members.

In short order, we reaffirmed our commitment to environmental advocacy. In our view, and as I will describe in more detail momentarily, environmental issues remain critical to our nation's security and prosperity in the immediate future as well as the long term. Our challenge today is to devise an advocacy strategy that communicates that urgency and significance in a time of national tragedy and a heightened attention to national security and patriotism.

First: what are the critical issues that we are at work to address and seek solutions for? To put it at its most fundamental, we are still a globe of six billion people putting enormous strain on the earth's resources; resources that we continue to depend on for day-to-day survival. The United States uses a disproportionate amount of these resources. Our appetite is causing strained relations around the world, as well as causing serious long-term ecological alteration. It is these globally significant issues of energy use, climate change, resource degradation of forests and oceans, increased use and human exposure of toxic chemicals that are the focus of much of NRDC's work. Global environmental trends in each of these sectors are indeed alarming: over 2,500 of the world's climate scientists have concluded that the earth's climate is changing as a result of increased carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere. The temperature is expected to change in the United States from 5 to 10 degrees Fahrenheit over the next 100

years unless greenhouse gas emissions are reduced substantially. Climate science is no longer part of the debate. The United States continues to emit more than 25% of the CO₂ worldwide, so making a commitment to reduce CO₂ through curtailing power plant emissions is critical.

Species are being lost at a rate unparalleled since that experienced at the time of the dinosaur extinction. And habitat is being lost at an alarming rate as well. One hundred and eighty million acres of forestland have been lost in the last fifteen years.

Seventy of the commercial fisheries are in decline. And yet many of the world's people depend on local fisheries as a major if not the principal source of protein.

The world's coral reefs, perhaps the canary of the oceans, are being bleached or dying off.

In mega-cities across the globe, from Beijing to Mexico City, urban air quality is causing significant health related impacts. Asthma rates have reached epidemic proportions in major cities in the United States, as well as around the world. In the U.S. alone there are 16 million Americans with asthma. Asthma incidence has doubled since 1980, and risen by 160% for children under age 4.

Over one billion people in the world do not have adequate freshwater; two billion do not have safe drinking water. This issue affects women in the developing world directly as days are spent carrying drinking water from source to home, and as millions of young children continue to die from dysentery and diarrhea.

We in the environmental community have said for years that many of these issues are becoming issues of international security as nations compete for energy, resources to feed their populations, water their crops. Although we are now faced with a major national security threat posed by terrorism, it is possible, perhaps likely, that oil and energy issues will quickly become entangled in the evolving fight against terrorism. In addition, these issues could easily lead to border wars in many parts of the developing world, particularly in Africa and the Middle East.

Many of today's issues also emanate from the modern, industrial society found in the developed world. Of the 80,000

chemicals in use today less than 10,000 have been tested for human health effects. Toxic exposure is on the rise and yet little is known of the human health consequences, although concern is growing as many cancers, including breast, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, brain tumors, and childhood cancers rise. Breast cancer has been rising at 1 to 2% a year for decades, 180,000 new cases each year, only a third of which are thought to be genetic. Every three minutes a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer in this country, and that will continue regardless of global political turmoil. I am sure many of you in this audience are breast cancer survivors, as am I. I believe there is a close link between health and the environment.

As we have regrouped at NRDC, we have concluded that the role we play continues to be vital for the short and long-term well-being of the planet and even for the stability and security of the U.S. Finding and advocating policy and regulatory solutions, continuing to bring these issues to the fore, remains important to the long-term well-being of the individual and the planet.

Perhaps most pressing in the short term is the need to advocate an energy policy that reduces dependency from oil, period; whether the oil comes from the Middle East or the Arctic wildlife refuge. We are a nation that has no thought for tomorrow in the amount and sources of energy that our inefficient cars, air conditioners, heating systems, and refrigerators use. We at NRDC know that energy security can be achieved economically, and quickly, through a combination of conservation, efficiency, and new technology. One need look no farther than California, which in a time of emergency reduced their electricity demand by 12% in six months. We can do that as a nation, if we take on the cause with determination. Reducing our consumption will do far more for national energy security than a "drain America first" policy of drilling precious public lands and waters for oil. So that is our first challenge, to address the current crisis with a clarion call for energy conservation and efficiency to meet the needs of national security for now and the long term.

You might be wondering at this point where gender fits into this strategy. It does because women generally are successful at taking the long-term view and one that has the concern of future generations at its core. Our own membership of half a million is over 60% women. Women as a political wedge can play a critical role in influencing the direction of policy, if we are willing to use it. And many of the long-term environmental threats that we face have women at the core, from the rise in asthma and breast cancer rates in this country, to the curtailing of opportunity for women worldwide as long as they are preoccupied out of necessity with carrying water and firewood long distances on a daily basis and caring for children sick from contaminated water. Our work will be to focus on women as an interest group, and take the commitment and concern that we know is there from our own members, polls, and focus groups, etc., and translate that interest into action.

Many of us are struggling right now with how to be useful in this period of national distress. In the first days after the attack, I put environmental issues aside. Now I have concluded that their long-term solution is vital to solving the fundamental discordance we have with at least a significant part of the world. We have to demonstrate a broader concern for the fate of the world, its people, and its natural systems that we all depend on than we have in the past. We have to work with national leaders in business and government to make a transition to a world vision built on sustainability and not dominance. And we in the environmental community need to broaden our own vision of who our community is, both in the U.S. and worldwide. We need to partner with women's organizations, religious groups, and those interest groups who share our vision of long-term sustainability but address a different community, a different audience in reaching it.

Reaching those women who share the long view, and are willing to raise their voice and demand action to reduce our footprint on the world, will be our charge. I ask that you all join with me in trying to achieve it.