

THE GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

By Sen. Albert Gore, Jr.

Albert Gore, Jr., a Democrat from Tennessee, has been in the U.S. Senate since 1984, having previously served for eight years in the U.S. House of Representatives. He ran for the presidency in 1988 and finished third among the Democratic primary candidates. Sen. Gore is a strong international environmental advocate. He chaired the first congressional hearings on the greenhouse effect and has led the fight in responding to climate changes and the threat of ozone depletion. He is the author of the World Environmental Policy Act of 1989 and legislation calling for the Nobel Prize Commission to create a Nobel award to recognize achievements in the field of environmental preservation.

Sen. Gore is the sponsor of a senate bill designating April 22 as Earth Day 1990.

On April 22, 1970, 10,000 schools, 2,000 colleges and universities, and virtually every community in America took part in Earth Day, the event that helped launch the environmental movement. Congress stood in recess so that members could devote the day to discussing environmental concerns in their states and districts. All three major television networks devoted substantial coverage to events around the country, and the Public Broadcasting System devoted its entire daytime programming to Earth Day coverage. More than 20 million people used Earth Day as a vehicle to demonstrate their environmental concerns. The enthusiasm for environmental protection that emerged from that first Earth Day led to the cre-

ation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act.

The environmental issues addressed by that first Earth Day were mostly local and national in scope. Today, we still face those original environmental problems, but we also face new, global challenges that were virtually unforeseen twenty years ago. The global cooperation required to address these challenges will be unprecedented.

Earth Day 1990 is being organized to overcome the sense of helplessness that many people feel in the face of these global challenges. It will span nations, economies, and cultures and address scores of important issues. It is rooted in a belief that people—working together—can accomplish extraordinary things.

As we begin the last decade of the century, humankind is suddenly entering into a brand new

relationship with Planet Earth. The world's forests are being destroyed at the rate of one acre per second. An enormous hole is opening in the ozone layer. Living species are dying at an unprecedented rate, one thousand times faster than at any time in the last 65 million years. Chemical wastes, in growing volumes, are seeping downward to poison groundwater, while huge quantities of carbon dioxide, methane, and chlorofluorocarbons are trapping heat in the atmosphere and raising global temperatures.

From the time of Christopher Columbus to the beginning of this century, world population tripled, to 1.6 billion. In only the last seventy-five years, it tripled again, to 5.2 billion. We are told that, in the next seventy-five years, it will double, and perhaps even triple, again. Nearly every index of the environmental impact of modern industrial society follows the same pattern of sudden, unpre-

cedented acceleration. U.S. production of synthetic organic chemicals has gone from almost nothing to 225 billion pounds per year—half a ton for every American. The world's fossil fuel use has increased ten times over, and with it, the flood of carbon dioxide into the Earth's atmosphere. Other greenhouse gases have soared upward at similar rates: U.S. nitrogen oxide emissions are up 800 percent since 1914; methane concentrations have nearly doubled; and the world's emissions of chlorofluorocarbons, which had not yet been invented in 1914, have increased by eighty times since World War II and are still doubling every decade, posing a deadly threat to the Earth's protective ozone shield.

These dramatic changes are taking place not only because the human population is surging and the environmental impact of our economic activities has increased, but also because we tolerate self-destructive behavior—environmental vandalism on a global scale.

The pattern of our politics has to change in the 1990s. In the last decade, we learned the hard way that the fate of our economy depends more than ever before on global forces. In this decade, we must come to recognize that our very survival is inextricably tied to the fate of the Earth's environment. Indeed, the environment has become a question of national security, which directly threatens the interests of all nations and the welfare of all peoples. Now, more than ever, the United States must lead the fight to secure the planet.

We need to deal comprehensively with global warming, stratospheric ozone depletion,



A hazardous-waste dump is part of Sen. Albert Gore, Jr.'s "environmental vandalism on a global scale."

TOM STACK AND ASSOCIATES

species loss, deforestation, ocean pollution, acid rain, air and water pollution, and other threats to the world's environment. In every major sector of economic activity, we must find and disseminate increasingly effective new technologies; some are already well in hand, some need further work, though are well understood in principle, and some are revolutionary ideas whose very existence is still a matter of speculation.

The mobilization of talent and resources required to mount such an effort has ordinarily been reserved for national defense, but many of us now believe that the emerging environmental threat, especially global warming and its consequences, must be regarded a genuine security threat.

With this in mind, I have proposed that the United States launch a Strategic Environment Initiative (SEI). The obvious parallels with the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) are intended. One doesn't have to be an admirer of SDI to see that it drew together previously scattered facilities and

resources and attracted a generous share of the government's budget for research and development. We need to approach the technological challenge of environmental protection and sustainable economic growth with at least the same intensity—and with comparable or greater levels of funding.

With our current pattern of technology and production, we face economic growth in the near term and massive environmental disorder as the subsequent penalty. This tension between the imperatives of growth and of environmental management represents a supreme test for modern industrial civilization, as well as for the Third World. For the developing world, the problems of reconciling economic growth and environmental protection begin where those of the developed world leave off and are compounded by high rates of population growth and a massive debt burden. Yet the cooperation of Third World nations is crucial to controlling problems as vast as global warming and stratospheric

ozone depletion. For example, the developing world's share of greenhouse-gas emissions from fossil fuels could grow from about 20 percent today to as much as 50-60 percent by 2050.

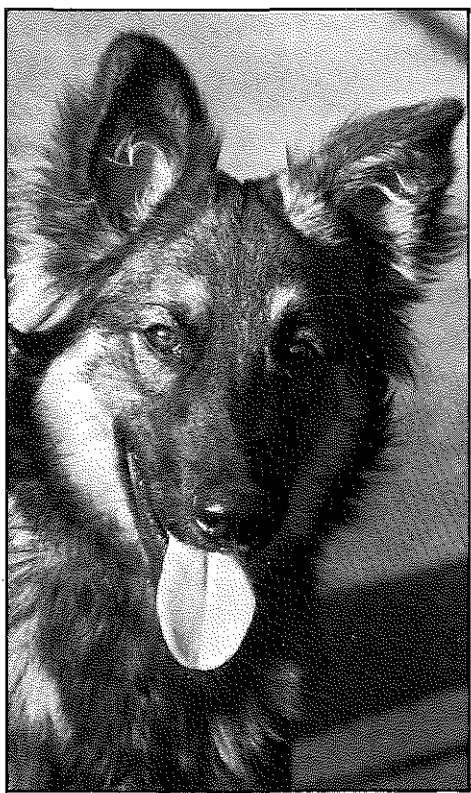
A Strategic Environment Initiative would promote environmentally sustainable development by identifying and spreading new technologies to developing countries, where 95 percent of world population growth will take place during the next century. Here in the United States, SEI could modernize technologies and practices in every economic sector, from more fuel-efficient cars, energy-efficient appliances, and manufacturing that relies on recycled material to a second green revolution requiring fewer fertilizers and pesticides.

Human progress in the modern era has changed the way we see ourselves in relation to the world. We now lack a sense of the proper location of our species in the ecosystem.

The new pattern of thinking we must now create is one in which

we once again see ourselves as a part of the ecological system which sustains us. In order to accomplish that goal, we must transform global politics, shifting from short-term concerns to long-term goals, from conflict to cooperation. But we must also transform ourselves—or at least the way we think about ourselves, our children, and our future.

That is why Earth Day 1990 is so important. In confronting the global ecological crisis, it will not be enough to change our laws, policies, and programs. The solutions we seek will be found in a new faith in the future of life on Earth after our own, a faith in the future that justifies sacrifices in the present, a new moral courage to choose higher values in the conduct of human affairs, and a new reverence for absolute principles that can serve as guiding stars for the future course of our species and our place within creation. In the words of environmental philosopher Ivan Ilych, it is time to stop running from "the shadow our future throws." ■



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