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Protecting Our Environment is Not a Luxury

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ECO NOTES

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I don't get the chance to see many movies for adults with a little one at home. Fortunately, more kid's flicks these days are raising important issues for adults. Watching "Wall-E" with my son Jonah last weekend left both of us inspired and saddened. The film was about the last living "creature" on earth, a robot that was programmed to clean up our garbage.

Garbage was all that was left of our planet, garbage in the air, filling the oceans and rivers and overflowing the land. The last human survivors lived a nomadic existence on a space station floating in space, going nowhere. 700 years later, Wall-E is still on the job compacting trash until a probe launched by the space station lands on Earth and discovers a living plant, the first seedling in many centuries.

Animals know that their continued survival means not trashing the place where they live. Human impact on the planet is far-reaching, affecting the water we drink, the air we breathe and the land we depend on for our sustenance. Because of the "long arm" consequences of our actions, we sometimes overlook the delicate web of nature we are closely connected to, a web that haunts us when our memories are short, and our actions unforgiving.

We live in troubling times. As cheap oil rapidly becomes a distant memory, the American way of living fast and driving fast is threatened. In times of national crisis, it's natural that people will look for quick "fixes," trying to reclaim bygone years of buggy whips and ice boxes. Suddenly, archaic notions of off-shore drilling and turning the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge into our next oil refinery are touted as "solutions" to squeeze some more mileage into our current lifestyle.

In times of crisis we tend to easily forget that humans are far less self-reliant than we sometimes pretend we are. Our interconnectedness with the rest of the web of life is often more obvious when we lose a vital part of that connection.

We Are What Our Bees Eat

Let's take a recent example. Colony collapse disorder has killed millions of bees -- up to 90 percent of colonies in some U.S. beekeeping operations -- imperiling the crops largely dependent upon bees for pollination, such as oranges, blueberries, apples and almonds. The U.S. Department of Agriculture says honey bees are responsible for pollinating $15 billion worth of crops each year in the United States. More than 90 fruits and vegetables worldwide depend on them for pollination. The disappearance of the bees could cause massive food shortages because most of the world's crops depend on pollination by bees. Albert Einstein once said that if the bees disappeared, "man would have only four years of life left". Many scientists believe bees are being threatened as a result of man's overuse of pesticides coupled with their loss of habitat, tied to overdevelopment of our nation's once-untouched open spaces.

Fool's Gold?

Then consider off-shore drilling. Climatologists tell us that hurricanes will be greater in quantity and ferocity due to climate change. This prediction became a reality three years ago when the Southeast was hit with four devastating hurricanes in succession. In the weeks following Katrina and Rita's one-two punch in the summer of 2005, the U.S. Minerals Management Service's (MMS) damage assessment indicated that at least 741,000 gallons of oil were spilled from 124 reported sources. Wells, platforms, and pipelines were shut down before the storm, so leakage from those facilities was minimal.

America's coastal regions hold an estimated 19 billion barrels' of oil. The biggest prize is California's southern coast, with an estimated 5.6 billion barrels of oil. The next-biggest score, in the Gulf of Mexico, is estimated at 3.7 billion barrels. The United States consumes 20 million barrels of petroleum a day, according to the Energy Information Administration (EIA). Which means even the maximum amount of drillable oil would only get the U.S. about two and a half years' worth of fuel. Realistically, we'd get a lot less.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) has been touted as our petroleum savior, yet the facts tell a different story. ANWR, the United States' only intact arctic ecosystem, is invaluable for scientific research. It is also uniquely sensitive to disturbance, making it virtually impossible to mitigate the effects of oil development. In a March 2004 report released by the EIA: "At peak production in 2026, oil from the Arctic Refuge would only still account for just 8/10 of one percent of world production per year, and only 3 percent of U.S. oil consumption. Even then, gas prices would only be affected by one penny."

The United States has only 3% of the world's oil reserves, yet consumes 25% of the world's oil production. **There is simply no way to drill our way to "energy independence."** The EIA estimates that almost 60% of energy burned in the United States is wasted. By becoming more fuel efficient, the U.S. could eliminate the need to import oil from unstable regions of the world. A sound, comprehensive energy policy for the U.S. would invest heavily in renewable energy and energy efficient technology to produce safe, clean energy and good, high-paying jobs.

The reality is that our planet is living on fumes. We have a choice. We can invest hundreds of millions of dollars to produce a trickle of oil to extend our addiction to a high energy lifestyle by a few months or a few years, or we can invest our resources into renewable technology that offers us and future generations the real possibility of a dependable, environmentally and economically sound future. For over 4 billion years, the sun has reliably heated our planet. There's no reason to believe its power can't become a leading source of energy for humans for at least another 4 billion years.

American's resourcefulness, creativity and perseverance have been the pride of the world. Let's harness that energy to build a world that our grandchildren can be proud of. Science fiction tales like Wall-E aren't predictors of our future. Rather, they help tap into our consciousness, so that our better nature rises to the occasion. I'm confident that we can find better ways to heat our homes and travel our landscapes without sacrificing our children's future and their natural inheritance.

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