

[Click to Print](#)

Feb, 2, 2009

Uncle Sam needs to go green

By JACK Z. SMITH / McClatchy Newspapers

Is America truly ready to be the leader in the global energy, environmental and conservation revolution that must take place? So far, we've been only a plodding, moderately interested follower, despite having more financial, intellectual, educational and technological resources to tackle the problem than any other nation in the world.

Here's why a "green" revolution is needed.

Our already ecologically strained planet is projected to hold 9.2 billion people by 2050, an increase of more than 2.4 billion from today's 6.75 billion and three times the population when John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960.

The lion's share of future population increases will come from developing nations where per capita energy consumption will skyrocket as many people acquire cars, computers, refrigerators and washing machines for the first time. This already is happening, most strikingly in the world's two most-populous nations, China and India.

You can't blame impoverished people in developing countries for wanting the good things in life that most Americans take for granted. As I watched the wonderful movie "Slumdog Millionaire" on Saturday night, I was captivated by the pluck of the lead male character (played by teenage actor Dev Patel), an impoverished boy from the slums of Mumbai in India, who rose above terrible circumstances to achieve economic success and happiness.

That aside, the crushing combination of population growth and even-faster-increasing energy consumption is a global train wreck waiting to happen.

The Earth Express is derailing. The planet is suffering from increased air, water and soil pollution, water shortages, loss of farmland, destruction of rain forests and coral reefs, loss of precious wetlands and wildlife habitat, greatly accelerated extinction of plant and animal species and depleting stores of petroleum increasingly controlled by countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Russia that don't reflect American ideals of democracy and freedom. And, yes, there's the troubling specter of global warming.

A green revolution should focus on dramatically improved energy conservation and efficiency and swift advancement of new energy technologies, including "clean coal" plants that capture carbon-dioxide emissions; more cost-efficient nuclear, wind and solar power; and plug-in hybrid and totally electric vehicles. We also should expand mass transit, encourage truly sustainable development and support strong family planning programs worldwide.

We'll still need fossil fuels for decades to come. I favor expanded domestic oil and gas exploration, but that's a tiny fraction of the needed energy solutions.

The most inspiring call I've seen for an American-led energy, environmental and conservation revolution is "Hot, Flat, and Crowded," the best-seller by Thomas Friedman, the New York Times columnist and three-time Pulitzer Prize winner. Here are some worthy Friedman comments from his book.

"I can think of no better example of America's lack of sustained focus to take on a big challenge than the way we have dealt with our energy crises. ... George W. Bush came into office bound and determined not to ask the American people to do anything hard when it came to energy. ..."

"We are in a position to use our resources and know-how to invent the renewable, clean power sources and energy efficiency systems that can make growth greener."

"Now we have to - for our own sake and the world's - reinvent ourselves one more time. Making America the world's greenest country is not a selfless act of charity or naive moral indulgence. It is now a core national security and economic interest. ... The hour is late, the stakes couldn't be higher, the project couldn't be harder, the payoff couldn't be greater."

I don't agree with all the energy proposals of President Barack Obama, but I think that he - like Friedman - is on the right track in realizing that America should lead a worldwide revolution on the energy, environmental and conservation fronts. Some sacrifices will be required, but the result will be a cleaner, healthier and more-sustainable world and, in the long run, a considerably stronger U.S. economy.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Jack Z. Smith is an editorial writer for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. Readers may write to him at 400 W. 7th Street, Fort Worth, Texas 76102, or via e-mail at jzsmith@star-telegram.com.