

Why Care About Global Warming?

At first glance, global warming may seem like a great idea. Sunbathing or eating fresh strawberries in the dead of winter sounds appealing to those who live in cold climates.

But the reality is more complicated. We don't know exactly what will happen in a warmer world—what the impacts will be—nor do we know exactly where or when they will hit hardest. Yet it's fair to say that we have a pretty good general idea of what's to come.

Scientists and researchers from various fields tell us that the possible effects of climate change could be far-reaching, and, in some cases, cause serious problems. In the words of Pennsylvania State University professor Brent Yarnal, "I know of no scientific area of study that has more consensus than the field of global warming."

Scientists' measurements indicate that the average global temperature has increased by about 1 degree Fahrenheit in the past century. It may seem hard to believe that such a small increase could affect the way we live. But during the Ice Ages, the average global temperature was only 9-12 degrees Fahrenheit colder than the temperatures today.

Scientists believe that a continuing temperature rise may lead to increased human illnesses and deaths, worsening erosion of beaches, and extinctions of animal and plant species.

How can global warming affect health? Well, warmer temperatures encourage the prolifer-

ation of disease-carrying mosquitoes and thus could lead to an increase in infectious diseases such as encephalitis, malaria, and dengue fever. Rising temperatures also could increase pollution and reduce air quality in heavily populated urban areas, leading to an increase in respiratory and cardiovascular diseases.

In addition, higher temperatures contribute to the melting of glaciers and expansion of ocean water as it heats up, both of which cause sea level to rise. Higher sea levels erode beaches, increase storm surges, lead to a loss of wetlands, and can compromise freshwater supplies by introducing saltwater.

Climate change also is likely to increase the number of species listed as threatened or endan-

may face moderate to severe drying of the soil as more frequent droughts occur.

John Magnuson, a professor of zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, points out, for example, that an expected decline in rainwater runoff under global warming "would have effects on drinking water availability, irrigation, and water levels in the Great Lakes."

Chances are that all of these impacts will have economic implications. Among them are expensive clean-up operations from the possible increase in extreme weather such as more frequent and heavy rainfalls in some regions, causing rivers to flood. Sea level rise may mean billions of dollars in property damage from worsening storms and increased flooding along shorelines.

Although it is true that we cannot say for certain what global warming will



bring, we know enough

to take sensible measures. Harold Frumkin, a professor at Emory University, may have put it best when he said, "The costs of acting are bearable. The risks of not acting are unbearable."

For example, when droughts are prolonged, the habitats required by ducks, frogs, and many other species dependent on ponds and streams decline. The effect of climate change on agriculture may be varied. Yields are projected to increase in some regions for some crops and decrease in others. However, large areas of the United States—particularly the Great Plains—

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