

THE PROBLEM

by Renee Yeh, 6L

Heat.

This simple word brings to mind the pleasant image of lapping flames, giving warmth to those chilled by cold. Happy memories of summers at the beach. The warmth of a mother's touch.

That was the past. This is the future.

Melting ice caps contribute to a rising sea level, inching ever closer to the prospect of cities such as Venice and London drowning. Species such as the Australian White Possum disappear, waters having heated up to temperatures far greater than they were ever meant to withstand. Brittle crops wither in temperatures that have become too arid for vegetation to prosper.

This is our future. And it is bleak. Our very existence is crumbling, thanks to global warming caused in part by the spike in carbon levels in Earth's atmosphere. Slight worldwide temperature changes have become the best case scenario. So what happens in the worst case? A 2010 paper from the United States National Academy of Sciences found that there is a 1 in 20 chance of global warming causing at least half of the world to become uninhabitable. Still, you may think, it's just a 5% chance!

But think about it. Our very own Mother Earth... swathes of land deemed unfit for life to survive. Most of the eastern US, most of inland Brazil and Latin America, tropical Africa, practically all of India, portions of northern China, and most of Australia: all transformed drastically by 2050 into barren wastelands, dooming anyone who spends extended periods outside on the hottest days of the year, even under shade with wet clothing, to a baking death. A 5% chance. A risk nonetheless. Are you willing to take it?

THE CAUSE

One of the main contributors to global warming is humanity's ever-worsening 'carbon footprint', defined as the amount of carbon dioxide emitted by a person's activities during a given period of time. The world average per person is around 4 tonnes of carbon dioxide produced annually...but it can get much worse in developed countries and cities. The average Hong Kong person produces around 29 tonnes, the 2nd highest average internationally!

Reducing our 'carbon footprint' will have a tangible effect on the occurrence of global warming... carbon dioxide absorbs heat in our atmosphere that would otherwise be lost to space, returning it to Earth. Truly, if we are able to find a way to lower emissions of this troublesome gas, a greener and more promising future will await us – if we are able to set standards and meet goals on an international AND personal level.

The problem is, worldwide emissions of carbon have been steadily increasing for years, notably since the industrial revolution, and the trend shows no signs of slowing down. However, a study done by the Global Carbon Project, found a momentary blip occurred when worldwide emissions of carbon dioxide declined between 2008 and 2009. Why?

After all this time, did people finally learn to 'go green'? Not really - the drop was directly linked to the economic recession and the drop in global GDP. Less production, less pollution – a simple equation. Can we learn to achieve a balance between our profits and our planet?

THE SOLUTION

To save both our world and each other, there is only one solution. One solution to rectify the downward spiral into environmental chaos caused by man's inability to compromise. One solution to prevent future generations from living in a world marred by climate change and resource depletion.

That solution is co-operation.

It's harder than it sounds, but at the same time it's a simple and elegant way to ensure the gradual betterment of our futures. What can one person 'going green' do for the world? No matter what kind of low-emission car he drives, or how much he cuts down on his waste, no matter whether he takes public transport or not out of courtesy to Mother Earth... will this one person's impact mean nothing, lost among the 7 billion others in this world?

No. One person's initiative to reduce their carbon footprint is the spark of change – proof of changing mindsets and advancing awareness. Think of a single pebble dropping into the ocean, making tiny ripples that metamorphose into gigantic waves...likewise, each of us has a greater hand than we can imagine in shaping the environment of the future.

The English novelist George Eliot once said: "It is never too late to be what you might have been". In that spirit, many have realized it is not too late to begin 'carbon offsetting'. A trend is starting, and everyone from individuals to

organizations to the governments of entire countries are coming to an understanding of what needs to be done in order for the human race to survive.

In Hong Kong, the Carbon Reduction campaign is enforcing emission regulations and consumer awareness of which household products have the best 'carbon footprints'.

In China, where trees that once helped to absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen have been chopped down, they now have the world's highest tree-planting rate: 47,000 square kilometers a year.

Internationally, where car exhaust gases are the primary carbon emission, high efficiency engines and cars that run on electricity, not fuel, are stirring up a healthy 'green car' market.

In closing, I leave you a quote by Aesop, the Classical Greek author:

"United we stand. Divided we fall."

Never has it been more important than now to unite. To stand together in defiance of that bleak future which awaits us. We cannot wallow in hedonism when by 2050, a million animal species may go extinct. We cannot assume that the dollars stuffed in our pockets will turn into the bread we need to survive tomorrow, when crop yields could decrease by up to 46 percent during the next century under slow climate change scenarios.

In order to find that greener future, we must look back into the mistakes of the past – and let our actions in the present speak for themselves.