

Way found to relieve guilt about global warming

by

Thomas Gartside

The Christian Science Monitor

I didn't believe it when I read that burning one gallon of gasoline produces 20 pounds of carbon dioxide (CO₂). At first I shook it off as just one of the many incredible statistics of modern life.

I took the problem to a science teacher I know. He dazzled me with chemical equations. Somehow he changed gallons into moles and ended up with pounds. The numbers were flying; but in the end he came up with the dreaded finding that burning one gallon of gasoline produces 20 pounds of CO₂.

The scientific community is still squabbling over whether CO₂ from burning fossil fuels can be blamed for accelerating global warming. We know that heavier CO₂ molecules trap heat. We also know that in the last century the Earth has warmed and that sea levels have risen a foot. Even so, scientists need at least another 10 years to know for sure what is happening and how fast.

But if the atmosphere continues to heat up at an accelerating rate, we are in for big trouble. By the time we have doubled the amount of CO₂ in 2050, global temperatures may rise 6 to 12 degrees F. with the largest increase at the poles. Sea level will rise, flooding wetlands and coastal areas, and much of Earth's arable land will be desert.

Scientists may be skeptical, but I don't mind saying I am scared. I have been driving my junker about 10,000 miles a year for the past 20 years. I have burned more than 13,000 gallons of gasoline, adding over 260,000 pounds of CO₂ to the atmosphere.

For years I have felt that I have been a responsible consumer. I was among the first to recycle. I never litter. I donate to conservation societies. But now I am faced with evidence that I am part of the problem.

This new awareness has led me to do some soul searching. I've come up with a long list of grim details and, at long last, a plan to undo the damage I've done. All I have to do is remove 260,000 pounds of CO₂ from the atmosphere.

This may sound impossible, but actually it will be easy with the help of a few trees. According to the American Forestry Association, trees can absorb CO₂ at a rate of 26 pounds a year. A mere 200 trees can do the job in about 50 years. My plan makes me feel a little better, but the situation is far more complex than I imagined. Americans are by far the worlds largest energy users, and I am no exception. Every time I dry a load of laundry I send 10 pounds of CO₂ into the atmosphere. Every time I fly, heat my house, or buy a manufactured article I am contributing to the problem. To be on the safe side, I'd better plant about 300 more trees.

All this penance is for past sins. I had better double my figures to atone for the second half of my life. A crude estimate puts my personal tree debt at about 1000.

It may seem that this plan is a pathetic symbolic gesture. Even if I succeed, my efforts are negligible, especially considering that there are 247 million other Americans burning over 130 billion gallons of gasoline each year. We need a tree farm the size of Australia.

But what choice do I have? By the time the government studies the problem for 10 years and swings into motion, it will be too late. There are some precedents for acting without the prodding of government. A utility in Connecticut has begun to plant 52 million trees in Guatemala to offset its CO₂ production. Still, we have been burning fossil fuels at a profligate rate for 100 years, and we have laid waste to the forests of the northern hemisphere.

It is my hope that the formation of a national, and ultimately, a global strategy, will stop the impending catastrophe. Meantime, I'll begin to clean up my own act by planting a few trees, and hope the idea catches on.

Editors note: You might want to plant a few more trees than our American neighbour as a Canadian gallon of gasoline will produce 25 pounds of CO₂ and tree growth is slower up here.

Copyright © 1990 *REAP Canada*