

NOVEMBER 2000

LETTERS

• Copyright © 2000 by The Atlantic Monthly Company. All rights reserved. [The Atlantic Monthly](#); November 2000; Letters - 00.11; Volume 286, No. 5; page 8-13.

Global Warming

In "[Breaking the Global-Warming Gridlock](#)" (July *Atlantic*), Daniel Sarewitz and Roger Pielke Jr. make a number of interesting points about society's growing vulnerability to climate and weather. In so doing, however, they unfairly mischaracterize environmentalists and scientists as sharing a single-minded interest in reducing greenhouse-gas emissions while neglecting the inevitable consequences of climate change.

It is true that most environmental organizations' climate campaigns center explicitly on measures and agreements to reduce greenhouse gases. Reducing greenhouse-gas emissions through the Kyoto Protocol and similar agreements remains the best way to prevent the worst scenarios relating to rising temperatures and sea levels.

But Sarewitz and Pielke do not acknowledge that environmental organizations have long been promoting policies aimed at making ecosystems and societies more resilient in the face of the kinds of stress expected from extreme weather events and climate change. Environmentalists support all the actions that the authors recommend to prevent destruction from floods, such as protecting forests and wetlands and curbing development on fragile coastlines. Environmentalists also advocate measures -- among them conservation tillage, which reduces soil erosion -- to ameliorate the effects of drought on soils. Although environmental groups have not always promoted these policies as "climate adaptation" measures, they have been pursuing them for decades -- far longer than their emissions-reduction campaigns.

Susan Subak*Elliot Negin**Natural Resources Defense Council**Washington, D.C.*

Sarewitz and Pielke give far too much importance to the fact that the U.S. Senate is opposed to the Kyoto Protocol. Senate opposition to this treaty or to some similar agreement is probably transitory. Flawed as the Kyoto Protocol may be, it is an important first step toward establishing a global structure that can restrain global carbon emissions. The authors are mistaken in saying that "the only nations likely to achieve the emissions commitments set under Kyoto are those, like Russia and Ukraine, whose economies are in ruins." The UK, for one, seems on schedule to achieve its ambitious emissions reductions.

The authors seem to think that because the Kyoto treaty by itself will not halt global warming, it ought to be dismissed. They go on to say, "Even if greenhouse-gas emissions could somehow be rolled back to pre-industrial levels, the impacts of climate on society and the environment would continue to increase." Obviously so, but that is certainly no reason to abandon critical efforts to curtail the excessive release of climate-disturbing gases into the atmosphere and thereby avert worsening an already perturbed climate.

John J. Berger*Point Richmond, Calif.*

Daniel Sarewitz and Roger Pielke Jr. reply:

We note with satisfaction that Susan Subak and Elliot Negin, of the Natural Resources Defense Council (a strong proponent of mandated emissions reductions), agree about the importance of reducing societal and environmental vulnerability to climate. Their agreement demonstrates the central political conclusion of our article: reducing vulnerability is a better organizing principle for action than reducing emissions. This common ground is of critical importance because, as we have shown, the impacts of climate are largely determined not by anthropogenic or other changes in the climate but by patterns of human development and environmental degradation.

John Berger's letter underscores the intractable character of the gridlock. On the one hand, even the most ambitious emissions-abatement goals cannot begin to address the world's climate problems. On the other, these goals are unlikely to be achieved. Contrary to Berger's assertion, a U.S. Department of Energy analysis released this year projects that UK carbon emissions will be about five percent higher in 2010 than they were in 1990. Berger may have been misled by a temporary decline in UK emissions during the 1990s. Ironically, this decline reflected the consequences of Thatcher-era policies aimed at breaking the power of the coal unions, not a commitment to global environmental stewardship. The UK's problems in meeting the Kyoto targets will be exacerbated by a 90 percent decline in government support for energy-technology research over the past twelve years.