

Green Wave Could Lift All Boats

Loie Hayes

Climate change is already having widespread repercussions throughout the world. In North America, asthma, heat-wave deaths, pest-borne disease, and deforestation are on the rise. Around the world, we are seeing unprecedented famine, forced migration, and ethnic conflict as glaciers, lakes, and rivers shrink.

Just one example is Lake Chad in Central Africa. It was once the sixth largest lake in the world. Now, it is almost completely dry. Farmers, fishers, and others are left struggling for water and fighting over access to the lake.

In Massachusetts where I live, we’re seeing more extreme heat in the summer and poorer air quality and more heat stress and pulmonary disease as a result.

Having greater access to mass transit and smaller dwellings means that urban households generate fewer *greenhouse gases* relative to households in the suburbs and rural areas. Yet urban areas, which are disproportionately populated by people of color and poor people, are bearing the burden of our worldwide addiction to *fossil fuels*. According to the Congressional Black Caucus, over 70% of African Americans live in counties in violation of federal air pollution standards. Compared to whites, Black Americans are almost three times more likely than whites to be hospitalized or killed by asthma.

The effects of extreme weather events, such as Hurricane Katrina, and the spread of infectious diseases are compounded by the fact that African Americans are 50% more likely to lack health insurance than other racial-ethnic groups. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 15% below 1990 levels by 2020 would save an estimated 10,000 African American lives nationwide per year.

International agreements to curb greenhouse gases must recognize that rich people and nations are *more responsible* for climate change, yet they

are *less harmed* by it. Poor people and nations are *less responsible* for climate change, but they will be *more harmed* by it. The wealthiest 20% of humanity have produced about half of the world’s *carbon emissions*. These people also control roughly 80% of the world’s wealth.

We must find ways to support an improved standard of living for poor people even as we work to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from every nation. Boston Climate Action Network, the group that I work with, is partnering with economic justice groups like ACORN and BOLD Teens.

Our “Ride the Green Wave” campaign is helping people to save money on their energy use while giving individuals a way to see themselves as part of the solution to the climate crisis.

By taking action, we begin to see ourselves as agents of change, breaking the paralysis that fear has created in so many people. The Green Wave campaign is also laying the groundwork for a *green jobs* revolution. As Van Jones has noted (see pp. 34-35), there is an opportunity within the crisis. If we mobilize intentionally we could create a “green wave” that would “lift all boats.”

Loie Hayes works with the Boston Climate Action Network. For more information: <www.bostoncan.org>, <www.acorn.org>, <www.boldteens.org>, and <www.greenforall.org>.

A COLLAGE ON THIS THEME IS ON P. 35.

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