



June 6, 2002

Ignoring a Growing Peril

By BOB HERBERT

Very weird.

The Bush administration has acknowledged that the U.S. will experience far-reaching and, in some cases, devastating environmental consequences as a result of global warming. But it does not plan to do much about it.

The administration has been so poor when it comes to climate change that this odd bit of news was initially seen as some sort of progress. It was thought, momentarily, that the president might be starting to pull his head out of the increasingly hot sand on this issue.

The administration's interagency report, which was compiled by the Environmental Protection Agency, notes that the warming of the U.S. is expected to be greater in the 21st century than in the 20th, and will affect nearly every region of the country. Seas are expected to rise, causing an additional loss of coastal wetlands. Storm surges will pose a greater threat to coastal communities. We'll have to endure more stifling heat waves, and the disruption of snow-fed water supplies. Some treasured ecosystems, such as the Rocky Mountain meadows and certain coral reefs and barrier islands, are likely to disappear entirely.

In addition to acknowledging that the earth is already sizzling, the report made it clear that human activity — the burning of fossil fuels that release heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere — was the primary culprit.

This was no more than a statement of the obvious for most reputable scientists. But the acknowledgment was a first for the environmentally challenged Bush administration.

And yet even this most minimal acceptance of reality was too much for the troglodyte wing of the president's party. Shrieks of outrage arose among conservatives, who immediately and loudly demanded that the president turn his back on the report and bury his head even more deeply in the sand.

So on Tuesday there was George W. Bush dutifully distancing himself from his own administration's handiwork. He assured one and all that he had no plans to lead any assault on global warming. He was coldly dismissive of the interagency effort. "I read the report put out by the bureaucracy," he said.

That must have been pretty demoralizing for the people who worked hard to put the report together.

If Mr. Bush did read it, he saw in Chapter 6 an interesting encapsulation of the projected global warming experience in the U.S. over the next few decades. Citing "plausible" model scenarios, the report said many areas of the country would undergo a change comparable to "an overall northward shift" in weather systems and climate conditions. "The central tier of states would experience climate conditions roughly equivalent to those now experienced by the southern tier, and the northern tier would experience conditions much like the central tier."

This change is already under way. Some areas are experiencing "a shorter duration of lake ice," and there's already been "a northward shift in the distributions of some species of butterflies."

These are changes that force you to wonder what kind of environment lies in wait just two or three generations hence. And yet we continue, with very little restraint, to spew out the so-called greenhouse gases.

The United States is by far the biggest offender on the planet, producing about 25 percent of all the greenhouse gas emissions in the world. But the U.S. has refused to participate in the Kyoto Protocol, an international treaty that calls for the mandatory reduction of greenhouse gases by industrial nations. And the U.S. has refused to impose tough mandatory reductions on its own.

Japan ratified the Kyoto Protocol on Tuesday. And the 15 members of the European Union jointly presented their ratification to the U.N. last week. But with the mightiest power on the planet unwilling to participate, and unwilling to formulate a real alternative, the gases will just keep building and building, causing the planet to get warmer and warmer.

What we have here is a very serious problem that we understand and could do something about. But so far, because of a lack of presidential leadership, we've taken a pass.

The E.P.A. report was called "U.S. Climate Action Report — 2002." It should have been called the "Inaction Report."