
Preface

Every nation has environmental problems, a result of the fact that humans are part of the natural environment but are sometimes unhappy about the limitations their surroundings place on them. (No doubt other animals are sometimes unhappy about this as well, but their options for changing things are rather limited.) We may want to live on a mountain-side, but the types of rocks and their orientation on the slope make construction risky. The frequent landslides and resulting destruction of houses in the developed parts of hilly California are an example of this. Or we may want to grow a variety of warm-weather thirsty crops on our acreage but cannot because of the cold climate, inadequate rainfall, and high cost of water.

People in many nations have similar environmental problems, typically involving water, soil, and air. Solutions to the problems in one country can often be applied in other countries as well. As a transplanted American, I am aware of many of the environmental problems in the United States: water shortages and pollution, air pollution, soil degradation, and contaminated food, to name a few. I grew up in and around New York City and later lived in Detroit, Michigan; Columbus, Ohio; Ithaca, New York; Austin, Texas; Los Angeles, California; Houston, Texas; and central Oklahoma. I now live in Jerusalem, Israel. Major cities, small towns, and rural areas are part of my background and have allowed me to experience many of the environmental problems that concern Americans.

I believe the problems have gotten worse during my lifetime, and this is the reason I wrote the first edition of this book. However, many things seem to be changing in the United States concerning environmental problems, a circumstance resulting from the marked change in national policy with the election of President Barack Obama. His view of the nation's environmental problems and the need to solve them differs

significantly from the view of his predecessor. The next few years may witness noticeable improvements in the way the nation deals with the environment.

This new edition of *America's Environmental Report Card* differs from the earlier one in several respects. Every chapter has been completely rewritten and updated with environmental information that has appeared since the first edition was written in 2003 and 2004. There is a new chapter on the deteriorating infrastructure in the United States—our water and sewer lines, power lines, roads, bridges, railroads, dams, airports, and levees. The chapter on energy in the first edition has been split into two—Fossil Fuels and Alternative Energy—in response to the emphasis on the development of alternative energy by President Obama. The new concluding chapter emphasizes the cultural shift that is necessary if the United States and the rest of the world are to survive, and how the world's spiritual heritage may be the key to effecting the change.

Many Americans—indeed, many of the world's citizens—do not see the environment as something that is integral to their daily lives. It tends to be considered an outside issue, often associated with scientists and academics rather than something that is central to their lives. On an everyday basis, most of us do not link what is happening in the environment with our daily activities. The environment is viewed as something “out there,” akin to the quest for world peace or the rings around Saturn rather than something that is with us and affecting us every day of our lives. Yet we cannot live without the water we drink, the soil in which our crops grow, and the air we breathe.

The concept of sustainability is not part of most people's lives. The fact that the planet's resources are limited and that these resources must sustain not just the generations today but also those generations to come, and that those generations have the right to be able to use those same resources and to meet what they feel are their needs is not something that affects our daily actions. Our responsibility to future generations takes a back seat to what we perceive as our current needs. But nearly all of what we think of as needs, at least in Western societies, are actually wants and could easily be done without with no great loss to our happiness. We need to treat the earth as if we intended to stay.

My objective in this book is to inform students, policymakers, politicians, and natural resource managers about the environmental problems we have created and to suggest ways of solving them that are within reach. I would appreciate comments from readers about omissions or errors they believe I have committed.