

Regaining



Nature's Trust

BY MARY CHRISTINA WOOD

Growing up in the 1960s,

my generation feared the greatest disaster imaginable: an atomic bomb attack by a hostile superpower. Even for survivors, life would change forever.

In my mother's generation, the attack on Pearl Harbor galvanized America—from the White House to the house next door—to defend our country. We reorganized our economy, social structures and family life. Men went to war and women went to work. Citizens rose in solidarity behind a clear national purpose. We were sure who the enemy was. Now the enemy is us.

Our affluent lifestyle and industries that feed it spew carbon and other greenhouse gasses into Earth's atmosphere at levels unprecedented in past millennia. They cripple Earth's natural cooling systems, causing drastic and destructive weather, meltdown of glaciers and polar ice caps, death of species and rising oceans that will inundate the world's coastlines. Hurricane Katrina was the Pearl Harbor of climate crisis.

Leading voices are finally breaking through our passivity and denial of this incomparable danger to Earth and all life forms. Jim Hansen, NASA's top climate scientist, declares: "[W]e have at most ten years—not ten years to decide upon action, but ten years to alter fundamentally the trajectory of global greenhouse emissions."

We must halt and reverse greenhouse gas emissions within 10 years, reducing them 80 percent by 2050. These requirements are nature's mandate. If we fail to reduce carbon in 10 years, we lock the doors of our heat-

ing greenhouse and throw away the keys, trapping all creation inside as disaster unfolds.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said in 2006, "This disaster is not set to happen in some science fiction future many years ahead, but in our lifetime. Unless we act now . . . these consequences, disastrous as they are, will be irreversible." He emphasized, "There is nothing more serious, more urgent, more demanding of leadership . . . in the global community."

Al Gore's 2006 film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, spotlights causes and effects of global heating. Many sources advise important ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We can all recycle, use less energy, drive less and so forth. But while we citizens strive to reduce personal footprints on nature, our government is doling out permits to pollute and deplete our resources.

County commissioners approve trophy home subdivisions. State environmental agencies approve air permits. The United States Forest Service sells timber. Magnify this by hundreds daily across the country. Our government is driving us toward runaway greenhouse gas emissions. How did this happen, and what can we do?

The United States has more environmental laws than any other country. Those laws do some good, but the statutes also authorize agencies to hand out permits as exceptions allowing the very damage the laws were designed to prevent.

The sovereign duty to protect the natural resources we need for survival is ingrained in government itself. We, the public, own the natural resources including the air,



The 7.7.07 Live Earth Pledge:

I PLEDGE:

1. To demand that my country join an international treaty within the next two years that cuts global warming pollution by 90 percent in developed countries and by more than half worldwide in time for the next generation to inherit a healthy earth;
2. To take personal action to help solve the climate crisis by reducing my own CO² pollution as much as I can and offsetting the rest to become "carbon neutral;"
3. To fight for a moratorium on the construction of any new generating facility that burns coal without the capacity to safely trap and store the CO²;
4. To work for a dramatic increase in the energy efficiency of my home, workplace, school, place of worship and means of transportation;
5. To fight for laws and policies that expand the use of renewable energy sources and reduce dependence on oil and coal;
6. To plant new trees and to join with others in preserving and protecting forests; and,
7. To buy from businesses and support leaders who share my commitment to solving the climate crisis and building a sustainable, just and prosperous world for the 21st century.

Sign the Live Earth Pledge by visiting:
<http://liveearthpledge.org/>

wildlife, water and tidelands. Our government is trustee, charged to manage and protect nature's trust for all generations. Judges penned these principles long ago as the first environmental law of this nation. For one generation to squander the wealth is generational theft.

But most officials no longer see themselves as trustees with the timeless obligation to protect the air and atmosphere for everyone. Immersed in statutory minutia, they bow to the more tangible private property claims of those seeking permits for environmentally destructive activities. If our retirement account trustees threw money away daily, we wouldn't just sit by and watch.

It's time we grasp the concept of nature's trust and our government's fiduciary responsibility to protect it. When we understand that our trustees - government agencies at all levels - are failing to protect what we all need for survival, we citizens of Earth will rise up in a grassroots effort to hold government to its duty.

Sisters of Mercy, associates and companions, yours is a special calling. Your religious vows and commitments impel you to live simply and use resources wisely, to study crucial issues and address urgent needs. Committed to God, humankind and all creation, you

"This commitment will impel us to ... work for systemic change; ... act in harmony and interdependence with all creation; and call ourselves to continual conversion in our lifestyle and ministries."

—Institute *Direction Statement*, Chapter 2005

pledge integrity of word and deed. Working alongside the homeless, refugees in Darfur, Central Americans whose means of livelihood are stripped by militias and multinational corporations—you understand the four elements of survival: food, water, shelter and health. To lack even one for too long is death. Every migrant in the Sonoran Desert respects nature's law. When you stand with people who depend on nature for survival, you are called to environmental intelligence.

But many people suppress environmental intelligence. Insulated by our economic system and their own wealth, they exhaust their time, money and planning

energy to sustain luxury, convenience, leisure and status. The market economy has always provided for their four survival needs. Disconnected from nature, they don't realize the market is built on natural infrastructure. They are not bad people, but they have a vested interest in denying reality.

The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 galvanized America. Ordinary people took initiative. Volunteer speakers

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—Jim Hansen, director
NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies

bureaus formed in cities across the country. These 100,000 Victory Speakers were key to mobilizing the nation quickly. They gave five-minute speeches at theatres, club meetings, town halls, schools—any forum they could find—to explain the threat and the need for citizen action. Victory Speakers were chosen not for their outstanding oratory skills but because they were “trusted and familiar voices” in the community—the banker, carpenter, school teacher, my grandmother and my mother.

Generations later, how is this same country responding to the climate crisis? Most Americans are too absorbed in their routines to make time for global warming. If we keep pursuing the American dream while ignoring the climate crisis, we will conscript our children in a most frightening war for survival. Nature won't recognize our children as conscientious objectors to climate crisis.

Ordinary people must become generational heroes today. We need Victory Speakers for climate crisis. Like the Sisters of Mercy who cared for wounded soldiers on both sides in the Crimean and the Civil Wars, you can transcend the polarizing politics that grease the crankshafts of environmental destruction. Who better than Sisters of Mercy, associates and companions to voice a trust obligation that springs from the heart of all humanity and transcends all governments, cultures and peoples on Earth?

Although she provides a U.S.-based perspective on the issue, sisters, associates and companions all over the world can respond to Mary Christina Wood's challenge to be voices to fight global warming.



Mary Christina Wood is the Philip H. Knight Professor of Law and Morse Center for Law and Politics Resident Scholar (2006-07) at the University of Oregon School of Law where she teaches property law, natural resources law, public trust law and other courses. She co-authored a leading national textbook on natural resources law and is currently working on a book entitled: *Nature's Trust: A Legal Paradigm for Protecting Lands and Natural Resources for Future Generations*.

For a list of Mary's recent publications, visit www.law.uoregon.edu/faculty/mwood.

For more information on the climate crisis, visit www.climatecrisiscoalition.org or www.stopglobalwarming.org.