Top 10 environmental stories of 2009

The environment is a single system—something which can easily be lost given our focus on national and state borders and the boundary between water and land. That interconnectedness makes the case for an annual roundup of the most important developments affecting the planetary ecosystem.

10. California land conservation deals. Here's a case of the silver lining: As real estate prices plunged, conservation groups found they could afford to buy wild lands to preserve them. The long fought-over Franklin Canyon was snatched from the jaws of development, and a deal was finally struck for the natural Eden along the Sonoma coast. Sierra meadows were secured to unite protected parcels, and the waterways of Shasta Big Springs Ranch were set aside to help revive salmon runs.

9. "Climate Gate." This story was mostly a Balloon Boy tale: no there there (TGL has debunked it in two recent posts). But it revealed the lengths to which climate deniers continue to go to seed doubt about the climate which is already changing. Yet, to poke holes in the details of climate science by resorting to crime, exaggeration and drummed up media blitzes, like Balloon Boy's father, is essentially to concede the basic point: Science provides ample evidence that the planet is changing, and common sense dictates that we get off our duffs and do something.

8. Asian carp knocking at the door of the Great Lakes. This has been a dramatic but under-reported story. In the 1970s, Southern Fish farms imported the voracious Asian carp to clean up the muck in their ponds. The population took off and made its way up the Mississippi River watershed. The fish are now at the very gates to the Great Lakes, where they would likely wipe out huge swathes of the native fish population in the largest fresh water system on Earth. The Mississippi and the Great Lakes are not naturally connected, but a canal was built to facilitate shipping. In other words, this problem is 100 percent of our own making. Environmentalists and the state of Michigan want to see the canals shut to keep the carp out, and the case heads to the Supreme Court in 2010.

7. Battle over gray wolves. The wolves of the Rocky Mountains have been the focus of another great battle. Based on what court rulings have dubbed insufficient science, the Bush administration took the gray wolf off the endangered species list. The Obama administration surprised environmentalists by okaying the move. Two states have conducted wolf hunts, killing many wolves that generally live in Yellowstone National Park and have been the subjects of groundbreaking studies of the long-misunderstood species. A suit charging the government with delisting the wolves illegally will be heard in federal court in early 2010.
6. California water deal. Our great state has serious liquidity problems, in more senses than one. Although it didn’t fix our budget problems (far from it), 2009 brought an historic deal that will begin to bring our water woes under control. But many important issues, including agriculture’s unchallenged claim to the lion’s share of the precious liquid, remain unresolved, so much work remains.

5. Beginning of the end of mountaintop removal mining? In September, the EPA ordered increased study for all mountaintop removal coal mining permits, citing possible violations of the Clean Air Act. Whether the nation continues to draw its power from coal or not, mountaintop removal is egregiously destructive and should be outlawed. Coal activists have sensed the increased momentum, organizing highly effective protests—sometimes with the help of celebrity scientist James Hansen and outright celebrity Daryl Hannah. Indeed, it’s been a bad year for coal power in general: No new plants were built, and a controversial coal-friendly transmission line was cancelled just this week. A West Virginia study also showed that coal costs communities more than it gives them in jobs, striking a major blow to the industry’s last great talking point.

4. EPA to regulate chemicals. While less dramatic, the EPA’s move to regulate chemicals will have a greater impact on most of our lives. The vast majority of chemicals are regulated under the Toxic Substances Control Act, which is such a weak law that the EPA hasn’t even been able to ban asbestos. In San Francisco in October, EPA chief Lisa Jackson announced that the agency would be revamping the law. TGL offered a primer on what it will mean to consumers. Meanwhile, concerns about BPA continued to grow with study after study showing their harmful effects, particularly to babies and fetuses. And our chemical policy isn’t entirely in the clear: The FDA is deemed the stuff safe.

3. Progress toward cap-and-trade legislation. The House passed historic (though flawed) climate legislation six months ago. The Senate’s Republicans have thus far buried the bill in the Senate, but Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) is backing a compromise bill. The EPA’s finding that carbon dioxide jeopardizes human health also threatens the Senate with executive action should the body fail to act. Most Americans support the legislation.

2. Copenhagen talks. On the one hand historic—if only because the United States agreed to do something—and on the other, tragically insufficient, the Copenhagen talks were good drama, complete with leaked documents and plenty of finger pointing. The real outcome is this: It will have to be average citizens, not heads of state, that bring about real action on the climate. Welcome to the next decade.

1. Climate change. It’s no longer an abstract threat; the planet is changing dramatically, refusing to wait for governments to get their acts together. The 00s were the hottest decade on record. The sixth great extinction is already underway, and several species—including polar bears, Adélie penguins, and the humble pica—are already being decimated. Studies show that all species will have to shift their habitats rapidly northward and/or to higher elevations; those that can’t will become extinct. Ice outside the Arctic is melting faster than previously expected, threatening to make predicted sea level changes look like child’s play. Sea level along the East Coast is already rising significantly. Shifts in the ice are also affecting the building blocks of the marine food chain, which could mean nothing short of oceanic collapse. The increasing acidity of the ocean as a result of CO2 absorption also poses a serious threat to coral reefs, which provide habitat for a quarter of all marine life.
The coming flood

If we don't do something about the warming climate, sea levels will rise—potentially on a Biblical scale.

The similarity is not lost on some faith groups. Faithful America, Washington Interfaith Power & Light and Nineteenth Street Baptist Church are teaming up with the Avaaz Action Factory to build an ark on the Washington Mall.

The completed ark will be the center of a candlelight vigil tomorrow, the U.S.'s flagship event in an international demonstration intended to show Copenhagen negotiators that the citizens of the world want and need a deal that will help the planet, not simply their political reputations.

Such a deal would be, the international organizers—who include TckTckTck and 350.org—say, fair (including $200 billion in climate aid to developing countries), ambitious (a limit of 350 ppm of carbon), and legally binding.

Chance of such a deal? Better start praying.

Protests at Chevron

You don't have to go all the way to Copenhagen, burning fossil fuel all the way, to show some righteous indignation at world leaders' relatively weak plans to address climate change: Protesters are gathered today at Chevron's San Ramon headquarters.
Chevron's Richmond refinery emitted nearly 4.8 million metric tons of greenhouse gases in 2008.

Why Chevron, you ask? Well, for starters, the company is highly ranked on environmentalists' Most Wanted list due to its aggressive black-hat attempts (those are three different links) to avoid paying up to $27 billion in damages for dumping (as Texaco, which Chevron purchased in 2001) toxic waste into Amazon rainforest watersheds.

And Chevron's Richmond refinery is also the single greatest emitter of greenhouse gases in the state of California. The company continues to seek a regulatory OK to process even more toxic and carbon-intensive fuels there. Chevron has also lobbied—and astroturfed—aggressively against domestic cap-and-trade legislation and opposes the Kyoto Protocol, for which COP15 is tasked with developing a replacement.

Arrests are likely at today's protests: TGL will keep you posted.

**UPDATE:** 31 people were arrested in a protest that Chevron described as peaceful.

The Story of Cap & Trade

While mainstream environmentalists have embraced cap-and-trade regimes as the framework through which to address climate change, radicals reject the idea as a pro-business band-aid.

Now Annie Leonard, who rocketed to leftie stardom with The Story of Stuff, offers her primer on the matter.

Here's a teaser; watch the full video here.
Polling day: The climate in Copenhagen

International negotiations intended to develop a greenhouse gas emissions reduction protocol will begin December 7 in Copenhagen. A quick portrait of the cousins on opposite sides of the Atlantic emerges from polls conducted in the U.S. and the U.K. in the last week.

90 percent of Britons believe the climate is changing. Three-quarters see human behavior as the primary driver of climate change. Three-quarters also believe that government action should be the centerpiece of a plan to combat climate change.

On this side of the Atlantic, just 72 percent of Americans believe the climate is changing. Evidently, one's political affiliations temper even one's perception of the weather: 54 percent of Republicans, 71 percent of independents and 86 percent of Democrats think the climate is changing.

"It's a sad state of affairs when science becomes subject to partisan politics," said Democratic climate pollster Mark Mellman. "It can only be attributed to the sense that this issue has become part of a political battle."

Surprisingly, more than half of American respondents thought the U.S. should agree to emissions reductions in Copenhagen even if China and India don't. More than half also support domestic cap-and-trade legislation.

California's cap-and-trade trial run

The California Air Resources Board released a draft plan to impose a cap-and-trade regime on the state's utilities, refineries and factories.

The plan, which comes as part of the implementation of the sweeping environmental law AB32,
makes California a laboratory for testing how the market-based approach to reducing greenhouse
gas emissions will work. The same arguments lodged against the federal government's attempt
to create a cap-and-trade system are in play in the Golden State. (Read here to learn more about
how cap-and-trade systems work.)

Industry claims the cost will be prohibitive, both to businesses and, in turn, to their consumers.
Some major environmental groups have responded by supporting the distribution of free polluting
allowances, though most environmentalists want the allowances to be auctioned off. Auctions
would generate revenue that could go to developing renewable energy infrastructure or tax breaks
for consumers and businesses that could face higher electricity and fuel prices.

In a press conference, CARB chair Mary D. Nichols also indicated her preference was for the
allowances to be auctioned off, rather than given away. But the matter has not yet been settled
in the draft version.

Also controversial are offsets, which allow companies to invest in saving forests, for example,
rather than reducing their own emissions. The California law allows offsets to be used for just
under half a company's reductions.

A few environmental groups, including Communities for a Better Environment and California
Environmental Rights Alliance, reject the market approach altogether, charging that cap-and-
trade regimes don't reduce emissions. (Read the Feb. 19 press release here for a full critique.) And
at least one industry group questions whether CARB has the right to implement the regime.

As California moves forward with the plan, we will gain clarity about cost, effectiveness and
legality. An important point of comparison is the Acid Rain Program, the 1990 pioneer of cap-and-
trade regimes, which proved much cheaper and more effective than its critics had predicted. Any
problems with the emissions system could potentially be corrected in federal legislation.

Sadly, though, even California's trailblazer emissions policy won't go into effect until 2012.

Is the filibuster a matter of life and death?

With a powerful majority of Democrats in the Senate, the body remains unable to pass common-
sense laws opposed by Republicans. (By common sense, I mean legislation that would benefit a
huge swath of the population, though not necessarily corporate political donors.) That's because
that procedural bugaboo, the filibuster, allows a small minority to block a vote.

With the Democrats are in power, everybody who's anybody in the progressive world—and even a
conservative or two—has come out against the filibuster. (See a list on Grist.) It may hold up
health care reform, when the current system is driving our economy toward collapse and doesn't
take especially good care of even those Americans who have insurance. (Yes, people, all studies
conducted by anyone outside the insurance industry back this claim.)
The filibuster will also likely block the passage of the Waxman-Markey climate bill in the Senate—a bill that more than 70 percent of voters support. The United States is the second-largest emitter of CO2 in the world, and domestic action is a must if world leaders are to agree upon any protocol to replace the expiring Kyoto.

It isn't melodramatic to say: Rome is burning and the emperor is reading the phone book on the Senate floor. Well, it's only inaccurate in that, nowadays, Senators don't even hold the floor to filibuster; they just announce that they're filibustering. How lame is that?

Another thing about the Senate: Rural states are overrepresented. The Senators likely to thwart Waxman-Markey represent just 8.3 percent of the U.S. population. Even if Waxman-Markey were to pass and an agreement were, somewhat miraculously, struck in Copenhagen a month from now, an even smaller fraction of the Senate could employ the filibuster to block ratification of the treaty: In this case, Senators that represent 7.4 percent of the U.S. (A treaty needs 2/3 approval.)

Without ratification by the world's largest economy and its second largest carbon emitter, a climate treaty wouldn't be worth the paper it's printed on. So 7.4 percent of Americans, or .03 percent of the world's population, can effectively hand the rest of us over to a seriously pissed off climate god.

According to a report by the International Energy Agency, without action on the climate, demand for electricity will be up more than 75 percent by 2030 and demand for oil will be high enough to undermine national security.

Comments?

Is individual cap-and-trade the wave of the future?

Britain's Environment Agency has proposed individual carbon accounts. Here's how it works: Each person gets an allotment of carbon emissions. The emissions are tracked using the equivalent of a carbon credit card that Britons would be required to present whenever they made carbon-intensive purchases such as gasoline or airline tickets. They would get regular balance statements telling them how much of their annual carbon allotment they've blown. Those who exceed their limit would be required to buy carbon credits from people who didn't use their full allotment.

The plan has a number of benefits: educating individuals about where their environmental impacts lie and forcing individuals to take responsibility for the climate crisis. It would also make it pay to be green.

The Environment Agency proposed the program as a way to help the country meet its legally binding emissions limit: It divided up available emissions by the number of residents. It's unclear how the program would link up with emissions limits on industry and corporations. (Here's a case where I'd love to see corporations count as people!)

The plan is unlikely to be implemented any time soon, but perhaps this is the wave of the future. After all, only those who exceed their share meet with extra costs and the information from the carbon "bill" would allow people to make informed economic decisions. Best of all, greens like me would rake in money from all the SUV-driving, air travel-addicted gluttons out there!
Al hominem attacks

Has anybody ever faced more *ad hominem* attacks than Al Gore? He claims he invented the internet (he didn't); he's fat (OK, so he was); his movie is full of lies (it wasn't); his home burns more energy than some small cities (I don't know and I don't care).

The latest attack, which seems to come from climate-denialist PR man extraordinaire Marc Morano, alleges that Gore is a carbon profiteer whose efforts to lead the world into a cleaner economy are driven by his investments in clean energy companies. This ‘controversy’ earned itself an article in today’s New York *Times*.

This strikes me as a Catch-22. Gore has money. He's gotten most of it from his work for the climate, including his Oscar-winning film and his Nobel Prize. Much of that money he's donated to environmental nonprofits, but some of it he has invested. If Gore had investments in oil, say, he would quickly be called a hypocrite (see the charge above about his household energy use). He’s chosen to invest—in accordance with his “values and beliefs,” as he puts it—in renewable energy and efficiency technologies. Which is a bad thing…how?

Gore’s investments through the Bay Area venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins don’t just profit from moves to cleaner energy; they fund the change. This is capitalism at its best: Companies with good ideas earn investments from people who believe in them. It’s also important to note that Gore has made absolutely no efforts to hide his investments.

The criticism Gore has faced is the cost of being on the side of change, apparently. Imagine an alternative scenario: A Republican Senator with a family fortune (let’s face it, most politicians are rich) who opposes climate legislation. That this Senator gets campaign contributions from oil and coal companies is a matter of public record—though it would be unlikely to earn an entire article in the paper of record. But what about his (and let’s face it, most Senators are men) personal fortunes? If he had investments in energy giants, would those investments generate accusations of profiteering when that Senator opposed climate legislation?

I forgot to mention: That isn’t a hypothetical situation. Republican lawmakers—including Kyl, Cornyn, Coburn and Hatch—as well as a few Democrats are heavily invested in oil and gas and coal companies. For the *GOP*, the oil and gas is the sixth largest recipient of investments; automotive is the eighth and other energy companies are 24th and 25th. (See the Democrats’ profile here: oil and gas ranks seventh and automotive 25th.)

James Inhofe, long the lead cheerleader of climate denialism and Morano’s longtime boss, had at least 10 percent of his assets in fossil fuel in 2007.
The bronze medal goes to...

China and the United States are the world's first and second largest emitters of carbon dioxide. Just behind the two behemoths comes... Indonesia?

That's right. The island nation, whose forests are particularly carbon rich, is being deforested so quickly that its emissions put it on the playing field with huge economic powerhouses. Indonesia ranks 15th in the world in terms of land mass and 121st in terms of per capita GDP.

The news puts increased pressure on the debate surrounding an idea called REDD, or Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation.

Because deforestation accounts for almost a fifth of all net carbon emissions, any serious attempt to control climate change will have to give developing countries an incentive to keep their forests intact. But the question of how best to do that continues to be a head-scratcher and will be one of the great challenges of the upcoming Copenhagen climate negotiations.

Environmental groups including Greenpeace are pushing hard for the REDD mechanisms work at the national, rather than project, level and be run by the United Nations. They believe this will be more effective and will prune opportunities for corruption.

But Interpol has indicated that even national REDD projects would invite corruption—like of the organized crime variety. The basic problems are twofold: First, it's hard to measure how many carbon emissions are averted by preserving forests. Second, forests are, by definition, remote and difficult to monitor and police.

Stay tuned.