

Rampant development destroying spectacular Thai coral reefs

Mon Sep 20, 6:45 AM ET

(http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&cid=1540&ncid=1540&e=7&u=/afp/20040920/sc_afp/thailand_environment_coral_040920104508)

BANGKOK (AFP) - Two-thirds of spectacular coral reefs ringing Thailand's top holiday island have been destroyed because of overzealous development



Officials said Monday that large sections of the 14.4 square kilometres (5.6 sq miles) of colourful reefs off the tropical resort of Phuket in the Andaman Sea have been killed and less than one fifth remain in acceptable condition.

Sludge and debris washed into the sea from building work across the island was the main factor responsible for the reef destruction, according to Nipon Pongsuwan of the Phuket Marine Biological Centre.

Three episodes of coral bleaching in the 1990s -- an environmental phenomenon blamed on rising water temperature and pollution -- was also responsible for the reef's demise, he said.

"Sludge from construction and coral bleaching are the main reasons which have destroyed coral reef along the island," he said.

Nets from fishing boats and tourists who sign up with the host of diving schools on the island were also blamed for a less significant part of the damage.

Phuket, famed for its white sands and seafood, is Thailand's biggest tourist draw. It attracted four million visitors last year, an increase of 1.5 percent from 2002.

Tourist officials are aggressively promoting the so-called "Andaman Triangle" that includes up-and-coming resorts in nearby provinces of Krabi and Phang Nga, as a marine tourism hotspot on the west coast.

The government has set an ambitious target of 20 million annual arrivals by 2008, more than doubling the figure from 2003, to help keep the fast-growing economy on track.

Tourism currently accounts for more than six percent of the country's gross domestic product and the government said it is on target for 12 million arrivals this year.

Mussels Found Near N.Pole in Global Warming Sign

Fri Sep 17, 2:21 PM ET (http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/nm/20040917/sc_nm/environment_mussels_dc_2)

By Alister Doyle, Environment Correspondent

OSLO (Reuters) - Mussels have been found growing on the seabed just 800 miles from the North Pole in a likely sign of global warming, scientists said on Friday.

The blue mussels, which normally favor warmer waters like off France or the eastern United States, were discovered last month off Norway's Svalbard archipelago in waters that are covered with ice most of the year.

"The climate is changing fast," said Geir Johnsen, a professor at the Norwegian University for Science and Technology who was among experts who found the bivalves. Molluscs were a "very good indicator that the climate is warming," he said.

"It seems like the mussels we found are two to three years old," he told Reuters. Such shellfish have not been recorded off the islands since Viking times 1,000 years ago during another warm period.

U.N. scientists say the Arctic is now warming faster than any other region because of human emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases released from burning fossil fuels in cars, factories and power plants.

As the white ice and snow melts, it exposes darker ground or water that soaks up heat and so accelerates warming compared to regions further south. By comparison, ice in Antarctica is thicker and acts as a deep freeze resisting global warming.

Inuit peoples in Canada, for instance, are seeing robins for the first time and hunters are falling through previously solid sea ice. In Scandinavia, birch trees are moving northwards into previously icy areas used for reindeer herding.

The scientists monitoring Svalbard also said they had found seas free of ice further north than for 250 years at one point this summer.

"The climate has been warming," said Bjorn Gulliksen, a professor at the University of Svalbard. "The ice limit...has not been as far north since 1751."

UNEP warns against use of methyl bromide, harmful to ozone

Thu Sep 16, 11:19 AM ET

http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&cid=1540&ncid=1540&e=6&u=/afp/20040916/sc_afp/environment_ozone_chemicals_040916151942

NAIROBI (AFP) - The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) warned governments against use of methyl bromide, which could have hinder the global bid to repair the atmospheric ozone layer that filters out harmful levels of the sun's ultra-violet rays.



"We are urging countries today to redouble efforts to assess the quantities of an ozone-damaging chemical being used to kill pests on shipments of rice, maize, nuts and other big commodity export crops," UNEP said in a statement Thursday.

"Significant knowledge gaps exist on the true levels of methyl bromide being used around the world," the statement quoted UNEP chief Klaus Toepfer as saying on the International Day for the Preservation of the Ozone Layer.

"This could have implications for the global effort to repair the 20-mile high ozone layer, which filters out harmful levels of the sun's ultra-violet rays," Toepfer said.

Methyl bromide pesticide, one of the major ozone depleting substances in use, is being phased out for some key agricultural purposes under international Montreal Protocol agreement, covering uses like fumigation of soils and pest control on farms.

But other pest-control purposes, involving exports of commodity crops, animal fodder, cut flowers, hides and consignments in wooden pallets, are exempted from the international phase out.

"The effort to repair the ozone layer has been one of the great environmental success stories, with scientists estimating that by the middle of the century and as a result of the phasing out of numerous ozone damaging chemicals, the layer will be repaired, but this is far from guaranteed," Toepfer said.

Under the Montreal Protocol, developed countries are required to end use of methyl bromide on farms by end of 2004, but some developed world farmers in Australia, Europe and North America have expressed concern that alternatives to the chemical could be either less effective and more expensive.

Their governments are thus seeking Critical Use Exemptions beyond 2005 deadline, which will be discussed again when countries meet in Prague, Czech Republic, in November.

As Weather Shifts, Beaches May Pay a Heavy Price

By CORNELIA DEAN

Published: September 14, 2004 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/14/science/14beac.html>)

Coastal geologists, meteorologists and other experts have long warned Floridians not to rely on the relatively placid weather that prevailed in the last few decades, when their state grew explosively. Now the hurricane pattern is shifting, meteorologists say, and the shift has dangerous implications for the beaches - and the coastal hotels, roads and condominiums - on which Florida's tourism economy depends.

It has been decades since Florida suffered anything like the one-two punch of Hurricanes Charley and Frances, never mind Hurricane Ivan. But if repeated storms become regular events, as they were in the 1940's and 50's, the effects are likely to be devastating, these experts say.

"People who grew up around here talk about how when they were kids they were regularly sweeping sand out of people's homes," said Dr. Stephen P. Leatherman, director of the International Hurricane Research Center at Florida International University, speaking of the era before the surge of development along Florida's Atlantic and Gulf Coasts. Now the weather patterns of those years seem to be returning, Dr. Leatherman said.

More frequent hurricanes would be a problem not only for Florida, of course. But they would be particularly worrisome there. Coastal development is heavy and its coastal elevations are low: typically five feet or less, too little to offer much protection against a hurricane storm surge.

Also, many of Florida's coastal communities have relied for years on projects to pump sand onto beaches weakened by erosion, which afflicts most of the state's coast, a third of it critically, the state Department of Environmental Protection said. Erosion will accelerate as global warming causes sea levels to rise. More intense hurricane seasons will make beach replenishment, already a problem-filled and expensive proposition, even more difficult.

The state's renourished beaches survived the recent hurricanes relatively well, said Richard E. Bonner, deputy district engineer for project management for the Jacksonville District of the Army Corps of Engineers, which covers Florida, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. "There's erosion, but of course that's what we expect," Mr. Bonner said. He and other coastal engineers often describe renourished beaches as "sacrificial": designed to protect buildings behind them, even as they erode.

But in places on Florida's east coast, Mr. Bonner said, Hurricane Frances has left beaches with what geologists call their winter profile, the shape they have after harsh winter weather has eroded them, and before gentle summer weather carries sand back on shore. As a result, these beaches will be more vulnerable to northeasters, winter storms that typically cause even more erosion than hurricanes.

Mr. Bonner and other experts said the effects on beaches from the recent storms were more widespread on the east coast of Florida than on the west. Hurricane Charley, which made landfall on the west coast on Aug. 13, was stronger - a Category 4 hurricane on the 1-to-5 Saffir-Simpson scale of intensity - but it was quite small and it moved fast. So its damage was concentrated, and much of it occurred on stretches of beach with relatively little development. Hurricane Frances, though only a Category 2 when it struck the east coast on Sept. 4, was a sprawling storm that, as Mr. Bonner put it, "hung around for a couple of days and beat the heck out of us."

In places where beaches were already weakened by erosion, Mr. Bonner said, dunes were cut and sand washed over onto roads behind the beach. In places, it even washed onto the main road along the barrier islands that line Florida's east coast.

Although Mr. Bonner said he was not yet convinced that weather patterns had changed, he said communities that did not replenish their beaches would lose them as rising seas moved in on shoreward structures like seawalls and revetments.

But beach renourishment projects can cost tens of millions of dollars and require constant maintenance.

Polar bears under threat from man-made chemicals, WWF warns

Mon Sep 13, 12:48 PM ET

http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&cid=1508&ncid=1508&e=10&u=afp/20040913/hl_afp/norway_arctic_040913164857

OSLO (AFP) - Man-made chemicals pose a serious threat to polar bears, harming the immune and reproductive systems of the animals which are already in danger from global warming, the conservation agency WWF warned.



"Three new scientific studies show that biological changes in the hormone and immune systems of polar bears are linked to the levels of toxic contaminants in their bodies," the WWF said in a statement.

Among the most harmful chemicals are PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), industrial substances which were banned in the 1980s but which are still found in massive quantities in the Arctic waters, ice and soil.

Pesticides manufactured thousands of miles away have also found their way to the region through water and air currents.

"Most polar bears probably have several hundred man-made chemicals in their bodies and they have never evolved mechanisms to deal with them," said one of the researchers Andrew Derocher.

Among the polar bears studied in Canada's northernmost region and Norway's Svalbard Islands, scientists found a negative correlation between the amount of PCBs and pesticides in their bodies and the number of antibodies in their blood.

The same was true for toxic chemicals and certain hormones.

As a result, the polar bears have become more susceptible to infections, while their development, behaviour and reproductive capacity have also deteriorated.

Researchers have also in recent years discovered what they call "pseudo hermaphrodite" polar bears -- females whose sexual organs have grown so large that they resemble penises.

"It is crucial to prevent these newer-generation chemicals from accumulating in, and polluting, the environment," said Brettania Walker of the WWF's Arctic programme.

She called for further testing on the potential toxicity of new substances.

According to WWF, the 22,000 polar bears in the Arctic are already at danger from global warming, as melting ice means a shrinking habitat and hunting grounds.

Top official urges more environmental awareness in China

Fri Sep 3, 6:21 AM ET

http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&cid=1540&ncid=1540&e=7&u=/afp/20040903/sc_afp/china_environment_040903102151

BEIJING (AFP) - China's top environmental official has warned of the danger of the country's runaway economy to its natural resources and called on the population to help control pollution.



"Facts and figures show us that the environmental problems need to be addressed now as they will determine the health of our generation," said Pan Yue, vice-director of the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA).

The amount of energy consumed in China per unit of gross domestic product (GDP ([news](#) - [web sites](#))) is 2.4 times higher than the world average and pollutant emissions are even worse, he was quoted as saying by the state's China Youth Daily on Friday.

From 2000 to 2002, air pollutant emissions actually decreased due to government efforts to control pollution, but last year pollution levels increased by about 12 percent from 2002, according to government statistics.

One local report recently said air pollution in many parts of China was disastrous, claiming children in large cities were exposed to pollutants equivalent to smoking two packs of cigarettes a day.

To tackle the problems, Pan called for Chinese people to become better informed about the dangers to the environment and report industry that spews out pollutants.

He quoted the example of a steel works in Tangshan town, some one hundred kilometers (62 miles) east of Beijing, where SEPA found "frightening" pollution levels after it was reported by local residents.

Pan blamed "certain leaders and developers" for "sacrificing the environment in the name of economic growth".

"It is necessary for us to implement a series of practical measurements, to widen the participation of the population in the protection of the environment," he said.

If not, the concept of sustainable development in China would be nothing but a "simple slogan".

White House Puts Off Logging Decision

Wed Sep 8, 11:47 PM ET

http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&cid=544&ncid=544&e=2&u=/ap/20040909/ap_on_go_pr_wh/roadless_forests_1

By MATTHEW DALY, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON - The Bush administration said Wednesday it will put off until after the election a final decision on a plan to allow road building and logging on 58 million acres of remote forests where both are now prohibited.



Public comments on the proposed rule change, announced in July, will be accepted through Nov. 15.

Agriculture Undersecretary Mark Rey, who directs U.S. forest policy, said the delay was a "fairly straightforward" response to requests from a variety of groups for more time.

"It's unrelated to the elections," Rey said.

Environmentalists said the administration appeared to be rethinking the plan — at least temporarily — in the face of widespread opposition.

"I think the administration recognizes the folly of opening up 58 million acres of protected forests during an electoral campaign," said Jay Ward, political director of the Oregon Natural Resources Council, an environmental group.

The administration said in July it was reversing a 2001 executive order by President Clinton ([news - web sites](#)) that prohibited road construction on nearly one-third of federal forestland. The ban on roads has meant no logging, mining or oil and gas development.

The new policy calls for governors to decide by 2006 whether to petition the federal government to permit new roads in their forests or keep them untouched.

The bulk of the land is in the West, including 4.4 million acres in Colorado, 2 million acres each in Oregon and Washington state, and 1.6 million acres in New Mexico. All are considered important states in the Nov. 2 presidential election.

More than 2.5 million people commented on the original Clinton plan; about 95 percent favored forest protection.

Penguin Decline Due to Global Warming?

John Roach

for National Geographic News

September 13, 2004

http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/09/0913_040913_penguins.html

The Earth is getting warmer, according to most scientists. In recent years that phenomenon has prompted researchers to investigate what effect rising temperatures are having on cold-loving penguins and other wildlife species.



Les Underhill directs the Avian Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. He suspects that global climate change may be responsible for declining penguin populations on South Africa's Prince Edward Islands.

The islands dot the Indian Ocean some 1,000 miles (1,770 kilometers) off the South African coast.

Viewpoint: End Global Poverty Before Global Warming

By Bjorn Lomborg, Special for National Geographic News

August 29, 2002

http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/08/0829_020829_summit5.html

With the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development underway in Johannesburg this week, much is being said about *sustainability* and *development*. The phrase *sustainable development* is a curious mix of Western concern for environmental sustainability and the developing world's concern for substantial, economic development.

At these big environmental gatherings it has historically been the First World's priorities that have won out. The challenge in Johannesburg is to finally get the courage to put development ahead of sustainability.

Why does the First World worry so much about sustainability? Because we constantly hear a litany of how the environment is in poor shape. Natural resources are running out. Population is growing, leaving less and less to eat. Species are becoming extinct in vast numbers, and forests are disappearing. The planet's air and water are becoming more polluted. Human activity is, in other words, defiling the Earth, and humanity may end up killing itself.

There is, however, one problem: This litany is not backed up by the evidence.

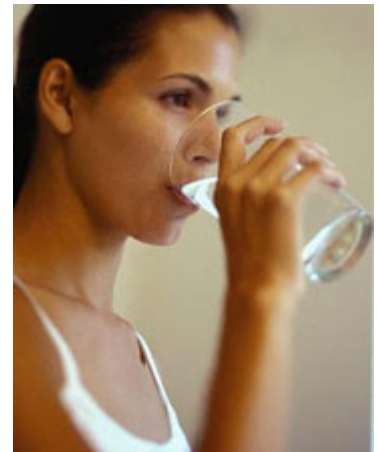
Energy and other natural resources have become more abundant, not less so. More food is now produced per head of the world's population than at any time in history. Fewer people are starving. Species are, it is true, becoming extinct. But only about 0.7 percent of them are expected to disappear in the next 50 years, not the 20 percent to 50 percent that some have predicted. Most forms of environmental pollution look as though they have either been exaggerated, or are transient—associated with the early phases of industrialization. They are best cured not by restricting economic growth, but by accelerating it.

That we in the West are so willing to believe the litany despite the overwhelming evidence pointing in the other direction means that we often make poor prioritization, focusing excessively on sustainability. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the discussion on global warming.

There is no doubt that pumping out carbon dioxide from fossil fuels has increased global temperature. Yet too much debate is fixated on reducing emissions without regard to cost. By agreeing to the 1997 Kyoto climate treaty, Europe has set itself the goal of cutting its carbon emissions more than 30 percent below what they would have been in 2010.

But even with renewable sources of energy taking over, the UN Climate Panel still estimates a temperature increase of four degrees to five degrees Fahrenheit by the year 2100. Such a rise is projected to have less impact in the industrialized world than in developing countries, which are predominantly in warmer regions and have fewer resources to cope with the problems of climate change.

Despite our intuition that we need to do something drastic about global warming, economic analyses show that it will be far more expensive to cut carbon dioxide emissions radically, than to pay the costs of adaptation to the increased temperatures. Moreover, all current models show that the Kyoto Protocol will



Unlike the person pictured here, an estimated 1.2 billion people do not have access to clean drinking water, and about 2.5 billion lack proper toilets or sewerage systems. More than five million people die each year from water-related diseases such as cholera and dysentery.

Third World leaders say that their priority is development in order to eliminate poverty.

Photograph by 2002 Philip Harvey/CORBIS

have surprisingly little impact on the climate: Temperature levels projected for 2100 will be postponed for only half a dozen years.

The Economic of the Kyoto Protocol

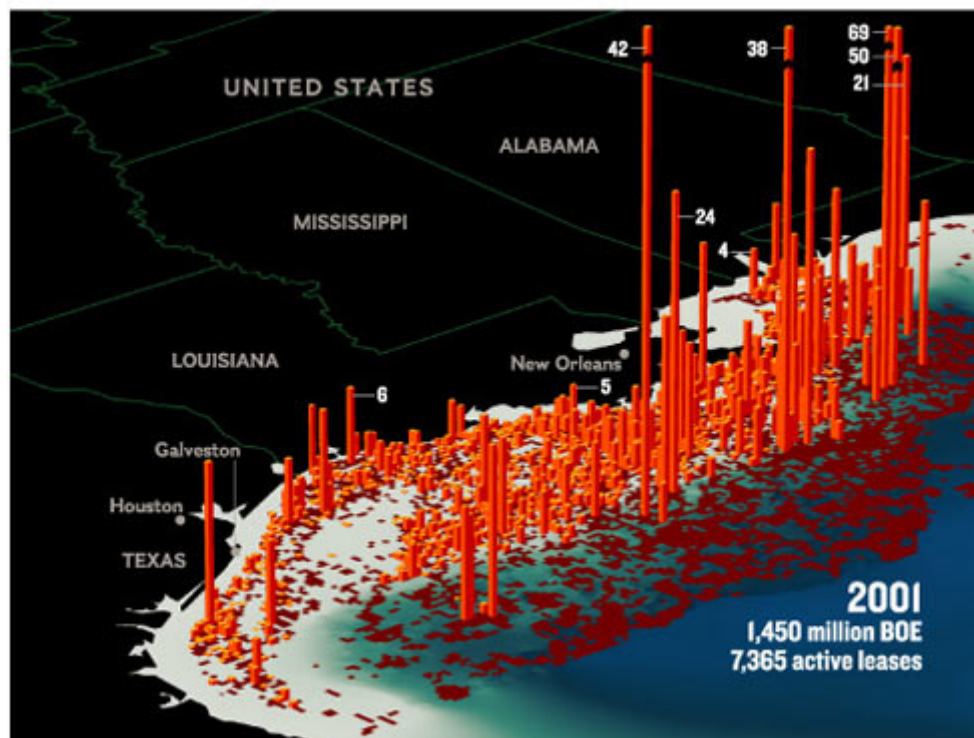
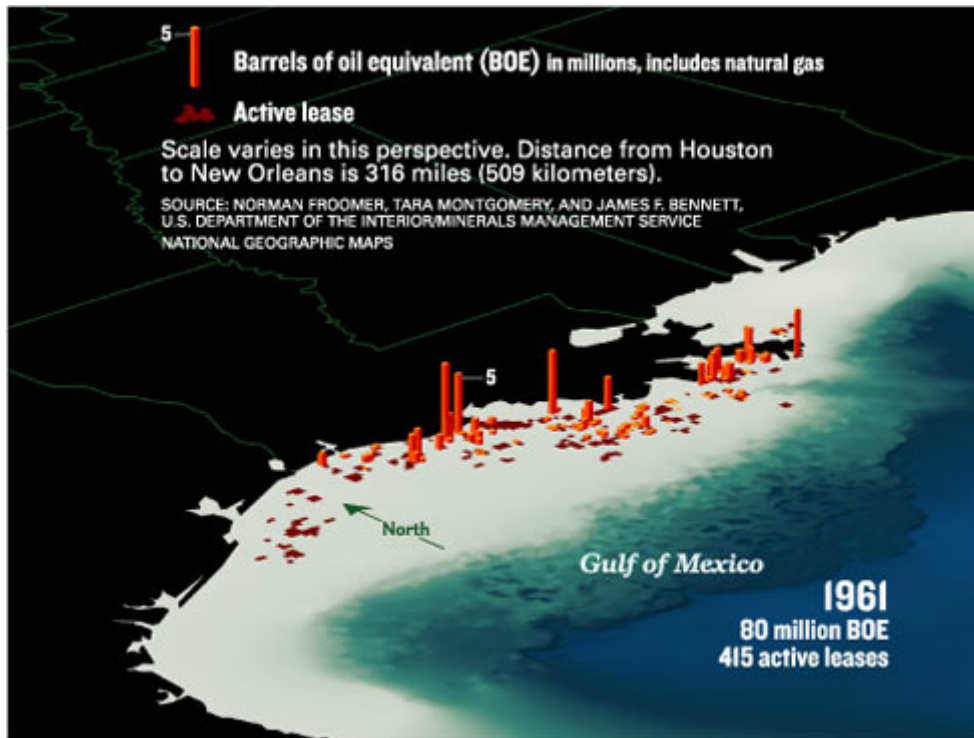
Yet, the cost of complying with the Kyoto Protocol will be U.S. \$150 billion to \$350 billion annually (compared to \$50 billion in global annual development aid). With global warming hurting primarily Third World countries, we have to ask if the Kyoto treaty is the best way to help them. The answer is no. The cost of meeting the Kyoto treaty for just one year would be enough to solve the biggest problem in the world—we could give clean drinking water and sanitation to every person on the globe. This would save two million lives each year and prevent half a billion people from contracting a severe disease. In fact, for the same amount the Kyoto Protocol would have cost just the U.S. every year, the UN estimates that we could provide every person in the world with access to basic health, education, family planning, and water and sanitation services. Wouldn't this be a better way of serving the world?

We need to focus more on development than on sustainability. Development not only possesses intrinsic value but in the long run it will lead the Third World to become more concerned about the environment. Only when people are rich enough to feed themselves do they worry about the environment and future generations. Focusing more on sustainability can easily result in prioritizing future generations at the expense of current generations, which is a backward way of solving our problems. In contrast, focusing on development has the advantage of both helping people today and creating the foundation for a better tomorrow.

The U.S. has a unique opportunity in Johannesburg to refocus the attention on development. The Bush administration has been chastised by many Europeans for not caring enough about sustainability, especially in its rejection of the Kyoto Protocol. The cynical Europeans are probably right that the U.S. decision was an expression of rather narrow U.S. interests.

But in Johannesburg the American decision could be recast as an attempt to focus on the most important issues on the global agenda, basically championing fundamental issues such as clean drinking water, sanitation, health, and poverty reduction. Such a move would regain for the U.S. the moral high ground. When the U.S. rejected the Kyoto treaty last year, the EU talked endlessly about how it was left to them "to save the world." But if the U.S. is willing to commit the resources to ensure development it might actually end up being the savior.

Bjorn Lomborg is the director of the Danish National Environmental Assessment Institute, and author of The Skeptical Environmentalist, Cambridge University Press 2001.



<http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0406/feature5/index.html>