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Human Rights Index

University of Iowa Center for Human Rights

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HUMAN RIGHTS INDEX

Prepared by the University of Iowa Center for Human Rights (UICHR)*

The landmark 1972 Stockholm Declaration of the UN Conference on the Human Environment affirms unequivocally that the environment is “essential to well-being and to the enjoyment of basic human rights—even the right to life itself.” Its drafters had in mind the earlier International Bill of Human Rights (the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights) guaranteeing the right to food, health, life, security of the person, and other rights fundamentally dependent upon a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. With threats of irreversible ecological harm mounting daily, especially by the warming of Earth’s average surface temperature (currently about 15°C/59°F), the time is overdue for present generations to safeguard the right of future generations to environments—local, regional, and global—in which they can enjoy their human rights fully.

- 2 Degrees Celsius (3.6°F) increase in Earth’s average surface temperature deemed probable by or before 2050, a change projected to cause significant sea level rises (Greenland will tip into irreversible melt when global temperatures rise above only 1.2° Celsius); heightened extreme weather; intensified flooding and soil erosion; expanded heat waves, droughts, and fires; the disappearance of life-sustaining glacial flows to major cities; aggravated desertification and crop failures (including Amazonian rain forest depletion and wheat crop losses in northern latitudes); famine in more than half the 54 countries of Africa; swelling numbers of refugees in search of food and water; wider spreading of water- and vector-borne diseases; the likely extinction of 1/3 of all species (Reuters, 2009; IPCC Fourth Report, 2007)
- 27 Number of glaciers remaining in Montana’s Glacier National Park, down from an estimated 150 glaciers in 1850, depriving future generations of the environment the park was created to preserve (EPA, 2008)
- 90 Estimated percentage of deep-sea predatory fish (e.g., tuna, swordfish, sharks) that have disappeared from the oceans because of ocean warming, increased ocean acidity, and overfishing—96% of shallow-swimming cod depleted since the beginning of commercial fishing in 1852, due to systematic slaughter, dragnet destruction of sea floor habitats, and other environmental harms (*Economist*, 2009)
- 387 Amount of carbon dioxide currently in the atmosphere (in parts per million), 37 ppm higher than what NASA climatologist James Hansen

- says is “incompatible with the planet on which civilization developed” (350 ppm)—prompting Hansen to call for an end to burning coal by 2030 or sooner (*Washington Post*, 2009)
- 2007** Year in which the Arctic Ocean ice cap shrank to its smallest size in modern times, leading scientists to project an ice-free Arctic as early as summer 2013 (*Telegraph UK*, 2009; *BBC*, 2007)
- 5000** Number of square miles of dry land the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change projects will be overrun by 2100, assuming a sea level rise of two feet, destroying an estimated 17%–43% of U.S. wetlands, including half the Everglades (EPA, 2008; *NY Times*, 2008)
- 10,000** Approximate number of residents of Tuvalu, each of whom is being photographed by artist Shuichi Endou to put a human face on the island nation’s projected disappearance beneath the rising Pacific Ocean within 50 years (*ABC*, 2008; *Der Spiegel*, 2007)
- 63,000** Number of garbage trucks the U.S. fills daily, though in recent years over 33% of municipal solid waste has been recycled, up from 6.4% in 1960 (Clean Air Council, 2009; EPA, 2007)
- 750,000** Number of photocopies made by Americans each minute, contributing to the depletion of an estimated 80% of the world’s natural forests, leading to greenhouse gas accumulation (Clean Air Council, 2009)
- 1,000,000** Number of species globally that could be extinct by 2050, including the polar bear and hippopotamus—the former due to vanishing ice floe habitats, the latter largely because of violent turmoil in the Democratic Republic of Congo that opened the door to unregulated hunting and a consequent 95% loss of hippopotami in the past decade (Climate Crisis, 2008; *BBC*, 2006)
- 4,000,000** Number of Chinese left without drinking water during a February 2009 drought—in a world where water scarcity affects 4 out of 10 people globally, forcing the use of contaminated water and unsafe water storage, contributing to mosquito breeding and the spread of disease (*USA Today*, 2009; WHO, 2008)
- 50,000,000** Number of people worldwide who could be displaced from their habitats within 10 years due to desertification, unsustainable irrigation practices, and the overexploitation of the soil (*BBC*, 2007)
- 1,200,000,000** Number of people globally without access to clean sanitation, contributing to the prevalence of diarrheal diseases, a leading killer of children under five (WHO, 2008; UNICEF, 2006)

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