

“What can the United States do to help ensure environmental sustainability?”

Honorable Barack H. Obama,
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

Of all of the challenges that face you and your administration, there have been few, if any, that were more globally relevant and pressing than the issue of environmental sustainability. Not only are America's treasured natural resources in danger, but sustainability touches the lives of every human being on the planet. Poor and reckless use of natural resources has altered and imperiled life as we know it, and it is imperative that we radically alter our policies to make safe, responsible use of our resources. We have an obligation to insure that we will not be the last generation able to enjoy the rich and beautiful environments that make America.

Now, more than ever before in the age of increasing globalization, the United States also has an obligation to the rest of humankind. As one of the richest and most powerful nations, we must accept and embrace how intricately we are bound to the rest of the planet. Our actions to take control of runaway pollution and irresponsible environmental practices will impact the entire rest of the globe; by becoming a leader in environmental sustainability and improvement, we can set an example for the rest of the World.

Nowhere are globalization, and the interconnected responsibilities that all nations have toward the earth and the international community, typified better than in the United Nations. As a political expression of the world's inter-relatedness, the UN issued Millennium Development Goal Seven, a commitment set on September 25, 2000 to shape policies around environmental sustainability, increase biodiversity, reduce the number of people without clean drinking water or basic sanitation, and to improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers. For the general development goal to be met by the year 2015 would be an incredible, and much needed, achievement. As the United States, serious efforts need to be made in re-writing current and new legislation concerning environmental practices, commercial interests need to be curbed and balanced, and successful international initiatives need to be given further funding and support.

The first, most obvious place to look when it comes to sustainability is fossil fuels: possibly the single finite resource with the highest international demand. In 2007, the Central Intelligence Agency estimated that the US consumed 20.68 million barrels of oil a day (World Factbook). That makes us the number one consumer of unsustainable petroleum in the world, while we aren't even in the top fifteen for exports (EIA). Although some research and production has gone into alternative fuels and source of energy, such as geothermal, solar, and wind energy, as well as hybrid electric and more fuel efficient vehicles, much further progress must be made in this area to wean America off foreign oil, and oil entirely, before the world supply runs out. Americans must get

their energy and fuel from somewhere; our only option is to continue research and curtail our consumption, with the intention of drastically reducing our dependency on a costly, environmentally degrading, internationally contested, and ultimately finite resource.

Sustainability does not just mean oil; more conservative policies and practices must be implemented to prevent the flagrant waste of our water resources. Although water is a sustainable resource, our use of it is not, as many communities are increasingly forced to draw on ground water storage but are unable to replenish those stores as the population climbs and water rights conflicts become more tangled. Earlier snowmelt and decreased stream-flow due to climate change are also negatively affecting the amount of water available to the southwestern United States (Anderson). Further examination of water usage reveals one very simple way for us to meet this development target: legislation controlling and curtailing the amount of outdoor water usage could reduce the nearly 50% waste of water used outdoors: an estimated 7 million gallons a day. Regulations on the efficiency and frequency of sprinkler use, and inspection of irrigation systems, could save millions of gallons of water every year. Also, governmental mandates that all newly-installed or upgraded faucet systems be of the more efficient variety could cut residential water use by nearly 15% (AWWA).

An important, but often overlooked source of biodiversity in America is our fish stocks. Out of over 400 species of fish in the US, 138 are listed as endangered or threatened (Fish and Wildlife Service). The biodiversity of our coastal waters is critical to the overall health of not only our ecosystems, but of the oceans as a whole, which touch the shores of hundreds of our international neighbors. The United States needs to do its part to control pollution, toxic industrial and residential runoff, as well as damaging business practices when it comes to fishing companies. Stricter controls and regulations on fishing corporations would reduce the amount of 'dragnet' fishing that wipes out whole species and accidentally catches and kills thousands of other. Exploitative practices have long-reaching consequences for the entire ocean, and the government could go a long way to curtailing such irresponsibility by corporations (MacKenzie). According to Brian MacKenzie, co-leader of the National Institute for Aquatic Resources at the Technical University of Denmark, the best way to mitigate biodiversity loss is "...ensuring effective, prompt implementation and enforcement of fishing regulations and effort control. This action alone would probably have greatest positive impact on marine biodiversity."

Corporations do not only have control over many of our fisheries and wildlife resources; they also control much of the world's available water. A major barrier to achieving the 2015 goal of halving the amount of people without access to clean drinking water is the competition that local individuals have with multinational corporations for use of aquifers. In countries like India, the Coca-Cola soft-drink corporation was found responsible for lowering the amount of water available in local aquifers ten times faster than it had before the company built a factory there (PBS). Bottled water companies also deplete already endangered local resources and block on-the-ground efforts to build local pumps, small filtration plants, and other local solutions. Clean water is critical to sanitation, which has the potential to save millions of lives. As the home of many of these corporations, the United States government should impose strict sanctions on companies to insure that they are contributing to the fair and sustainable future of the regions where

they operate. Also, as one of the most influential nations, we should fund and encourage the governments of other nations to mandate equitable distribution of resources.

There is one more target of the UN Millennium Development Goal Seven: to improve the lives of 100 million slum-dwelling people by the year 2020. While the federal roots of these problems will some day have to be addressed by the governments of these nations, today the best way for the United States to alleviate the suffering of the disadvantaged world wide is through simple, basic solutions: sanitation and shelter. Financing should be provided, and companies encouraged, to invest in constructing durable, safe housing and reliable sanitation facilities for the millions who go without it. Although we don't have conditions comparable to those of many other parts of the world, we still have a responsibility as a First World nation to those who are in need, and funding initiative such as the Slum Sanitation Program in Mumbai, or the construction of much needed housing, is the best way that we can fulfill some of our obligations to humanity.

Mr. President, although we face many challenges here at home, it is increasingly imperative that we not forget our responsibilities to the rest of the world. The problems in biodiversity, environmental sustainability, and sanitation and water must all be addressed in a cogent and proactive manner on the federal level. If we are to become and remain stewards of the planet and successful members of the human race, we must not allow isolation or fear stop us from doing what we can to promote a healthy world. Environmental sustainability has too many far-reaching effects, from biodiversity and our own shores to the health and happiness of millions, for us to fail to do our part.

Sincerely,

Madeline Zhu

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