

Ann Arbor 350: Taking on Climate Change, One Challenge at a Time

By Monica Patel

Most of us in Washtenaw County have experienced the effects of global warming in the form of flooding from heavy rains and other strange weather patterns these last two years. And we're not alone. Just during October 2011, extreme weather affected millions of people across the United States, as well as those in Pakistan, Russia, Japan, Thailand, and more.

As many as 10 million people a year become "climate refugees," displaced from their homes due to climate-related disasters that include floods, wildfires, and tornadoes. Extreme weather in the U.S. caused over \$32 billion in damages by mid-June, at which point the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration declared 2011 the most extreme weather-related disaster year on record.

Here in Michigan, experts predict longer growing seasons due to climate change — but we'll also see more extreme heat, heavier and more frequent rainstorms, and dramatic influxes of climate refugees, all of which will put pressure on our incredible water resources.

Untold hardship and human suffering follows these natural disasters, and it's clear that the climate change problem needs to be addressed. The question then becomes: Which small changes lead to the biggest impact?

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Globally, the actions of the average person emit 4.5 tons of carbon dioxide each year, but Americans go above and beyond, responsible for a whopping 20 tons of carbon dioxide per person per year. Scientists have calculated that we all need to lower our emissions to 2 tons per capita, which means that we have got to get moving!

If those of us who live in resource-rich, water-abundant places start changing our ways and reducing our carbon footprint *now*, we can help reduce the impact of global warming, as well as heading off local ramifications.

While the U.S. Climate Bill languishes in Congress and climate deniers make a mockery of science, folks on the ground are building an incredible grassroots movement. One of these people is Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org. 350.org is an international campaign to unite the world around solutions to the climate crisis. The organization is named "350" because scientists say that 350 ppm (parts per million) is the safe upper limit for carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

The 350 Climate Pledge lists a few easy household, transportation, and food-related actions that have the potential to make a huge difference... Just pick a few actions, write them down, and send them to us. We'll check in on you to help you meet your goals, and we'll also celebrate your accomplishments.

When McKibben came to Ann Arbor in 2009, he shared the successes of the International Day of Climate Action, a day CNN called "the most widespread day of political action in our planet's history." McKibben's inspiring visit sparked the formation of Ann Arbor 350, an Ecology Center project that promotes local action to help solve the global problem. For the past three years, Ann Arbor 350 has worked with and inspired community members to minimize their own carbon footprint. For our first action, the 10/10/10 Garden Challenge, we united to help our neighbors grow more of their own food — and to make a statement in the process. Volunteers visited local families, businesses, and organizations to help assemble raised garden beds made by the Ypsilanti-based nonprofit, Growing Hope.

The food industry accounts for about 10 percent of fossil fuel use in the United States, and about 40 percent of its carbon footprint is due to packaging, processing, and transportation. To put it another way, studies estimate that processed food in the United States travels over 1,300 miles, and fresh produce travels over 1,500 miles, before being consumed. By putting food gardens into front yards, we're teaching people where their food comes from and, as a happy byproduct, we enjoy a simple, easy reduction in our own carbon footprint.

We've mapped nearly 200 visible, edible "350 Gardens" — and added even more to front yards, schoolyards, and church grounds in the past two years. Many of these gardens have either inspired others to start their own 350 Gardens, or sparked conversation about local food or the 350 movement.

Throughout the past year, we promoted the Household Energy Challenge, the Commuter Challenge, and the Mission Zero Fest — encouraging people to save energy at home, to take a low-carbon commute, and to consider visionary, clean-energy approaches for buildings. And in October, we added more gardens to the 350 Garden network to get a head start on next year's growing season.



Gaia Kile participates in Ann Arbor 350

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What's next? The 350 Climate Pledge. Sign up at www.aa350.org to take some simple, fun steps to reduce your personal carbon footprint. The Pledge lists a few easy household, transportation, and food-related actions that have the potential to make a huge difference.

For instance, by installing a low-flow showerhead, you can save 105 pounds of carbon dioxide (CO²) per month with no inconvenience to your lifestyle. Or you might consider washing your clothes on the cold/cold washer settings and use only 13.5 pounds of carbon dioxide per month, instead of the 200 pounds of CO² you waste using hot/warm water. If one person completes all of the Climate Pledge actions for a year, they will save 4.9 tons of carbon dioxide.

Just pick a few actions, write them on the Climate Pledge, and send them to us. We'll check in on you to help you meet your goals, and we'll also celebrate your accomplishments. To assist in achieving these important goals, we will also make sure that we, as a community, are ready to rally together to add our voices to the roar that will be needed to get the attention of our politicians.

Remember: It doesn't end with the Climate Pledge, it starts there. This journey will be more fun — and more fruitful — if we take it together.

For more information about the Climate Pledge or to register your 350 Garden, visit www.aa350.org.

Monica Patel has been a policy specialist at the Ecology Center for over four years, and part of Ann Arbor 350 since it started. She's a newbie gardener, and an active participant in The Agrarian Adventure, a nonprofit group that partners with K-12 schools to enrich students' connection between the foods they eat, their personal health, and the health of their communities and the environment. Monica can be reached at annarbor350@ecocenter.org.

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