



Global Highlights

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Environment and Natural Resources

Assessing the effects of Global Warming

- After establishing that Global Warming is in fact taking place and it is most likely due to human activity, the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) released its Fourth Assessment Report on April 6 at Brussels on “Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability” to Climate Change (<http://www.ipcc.ch/>).
- There are three areas of major impact on human activity: availability of water, vulnerability to natural disasters and agricultural productivity.
- The water availability picture shows major contrasts depending on latitudes: high latitude areas as well as those close to high mountain ranges will see an increase in runoffs and more water will be available, especially in spring and early summer. On the other hand, low latitude areas, some of them already under severe water stress in the Middle East, North Africa and North America, will face lower water availability. Over the long-term, as glaciers melt, even high latitude areas might suffer some form of water stress.
- Low lying urban settlements, especially those in hurricane prone zones, will face major threats due to higher sea levels and more frequent and stronger weather related events like hurricanes and storms. The large communities living in the mega river-deltas in Asia, Africa and North America will be the most affected ones. Communities living in the Himalayas and the Alps, as well as the large mountain ranges in low-latitude America will also be threatened by floods and avalanches due to the meltdown of glaciers.
- Agricultural productivity in low-latitude areas, will be reduced, affecting mostly North Africa and parts of America.
- The combined effect of climate change on water and agriculture will have major impacts in North Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia. Given the already precarious living of large populations in these areas, this will have major human and economic impact, increasing pressure for migration as well as becoming a source of major social and even armed conflict¹.
- Positive news are hard to find in the report, however there is one of relevance for Europe: the authors dismiss as unlikely to happen during this century, a major change in the Atlantic Ocean water circulation patterns, discarding a major drop in average temperatures (like the Little Ice Age or even worse) in Western Europe. However they are less sure about this not occurring in the next century.

Do not jump on bio-fuels blindfolded

- Public debate on the merits and costs of different origins of bio-fuels is warming up. Even though the origin is not so important for those concerned about security and dependence on unreliable foreign supplies, it does matter for those concerned about global warming and loss of forests and natural areas: corn (the US favoured alternative) is very energy intensive and far less efficient than sugar (Brazil’s option) as a source for bio-fuels, as shown in a recent issue of *The Economist* (April 7th edition).

¹ The linkage between environmental disasters and human conflict has been stressed in a recent book by Jared Diamond: “Collapse”. 2005.