

reflections

by Achim Steiner,
UN Under-Secretary-General
and Executive Director of the UN
Environment Programme

Nearly 130 years after Thomas Edison invented it, the world may be on the brink of saying 'thank you, and goodnight' to the incandescent electric light bulb. Australia has announced a ban; Cuba, Venezuela and the European Union are among those moving in the same direction. We should celebrate its demise, for the world's billions of bulbs — only five per cent efficient at converting power into light — cause massive emissions of carbon dioxide.

Of course, dealing with climate change requires governments to regulate on emission reduction targets and promote more sustainable forms of energy generation and consumption. But part of the solution also lies around the corner at the local shop or supermarket, just as much as in international conference halls. This message — that the power to act rests as much with consumers as with ministers and heads of state — is emphasized by World Environment Day, which this year is being hosted by the Government of Norway in the Arctic city of Tromsø.

Phasing out energy wasting light bulbs is just one of many opportunities. A report by UNEP's Sustainable Construction and Building Initiative, for example, shows that, even by conservative estimates, buildings worldwide could cut CO₂ emissions by 1.8 billion tonnes a year with the right mix of appropriate government regulation, greater use of energy saving technologies and behavioural change. A more aggressive energy efficiency policy might deliver more than 2 billion tonnes — almost three times the entire amount scheduled to be cut under the Kyoto Protocol.

As the latest reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) make clear, climate change is a huge social, environmental and economic challenge. The polar regions — a central focus of World Environment Day 2007 — are especially vulnerable. In the Arctic, widespread melting of ice, subsidence damage to buildings and infrastructure as their permafrost thaws, coastal erosion, and the loss of traditional livelihoods are all set to intensify unless greenhouse gas emissions are decisively cut.

On the positive side, combating climate change also presents a significant opportunity to deliver on the many promises made by developed countries to the developing world on finance and development, and to open new ways of addressing wider environmental issues, from air pollution to deforestation. Indeed, if we are to avoid dangerous climate change and ensure the stability of Antarctica and the Arctic, let alone the rest of the world, we must marshal



our intellect and seek every solution — from energy saving, to developing cleaner and more efficient energy supplies, to managing land and vegetation more sustainably.

The absolute need is for a global regime that delivers a fair, equitable and meaningful emission reduction strategy after 2012, when the Kyoto Protocol expires. Industrialized nations must move first and furthest. The European Union's target for cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 20 per cent by 2020 should be applauded. It is time for others to pick up the gauntlet.

The rest of the industrialized world can no longer seek a reason for inaction in the myth that the rapidly developing countries are not willing to contribute to efforts to reduce CO₂. Brazil, for example, is likely to bring down its greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 14 per cent by 2020; with assistance, this could rise to close to 30 per cent. It is a similar story in China and in some sectors of the Indian economy, including transport.

Reductions of 60 to 80 per cent will eventually be needed fully to stabilize the atmosphere. New technologies will be needed: if a strong, post-Kyoto regime is in place, it will doubtless drive invention. But we can already do a lot to save the polar ice caps, and the rest of the world, for the cost of a few Euros or dollars, using technologies already in the shops.

The International Energy Agency estimates that a total, global switch to compact fluorescent bulbs would deliver CO₂ savings of 470 million tonnes in 2010 — over half the scheduled reductions under the Kyoto Protocol. It is time to consign the incandescent light bulb to the history books. This might give us a chance to begin relegating dramatic polar melting and dangerous climate change to the same pages.

UNEP promotes

environmentally sound practices
globally and in its own activities.

This magazine is printed on 100% recycled
paper, using vegetable-based inks and other
eco-friendly practices. Our distribution policy
aims to reduce UNEP's carbon footprint.

Cover photo © John Wilkes Studio/Corbis. Melting ice is the hot topic for this edition of Our Planet. The theme of World Environment Day 2007 emphasizes the importance of the world's cold environments, from the frozen poles to the tropical ice caps of Africa and South America, and the Himalayan glaciers that sit at the roof of the world and provide meltwater to a region that is home to nearly half the world's population. As these vital abodes of snow and ice melt, so will the hopes of averting the disastrous consequences of runaway climate change.