
About.com Environmental Issues

Top Environmental Issues of the Decade, 2000-2009

By [Larry West](#), About.com Guide

The first decade of the 21st century (2000-2009) was 10 years of change for the environment, as new environmental issues emerged and existing issues evolved. Here's my take on the top environmental issues of the past decade.

1. Environment Goes Mainstream

The most significant environmental issue of 2000-2009 was the environment itself. During the past 10 years, the environment played an increasingly important role in almost every aspect of modern life—from politics and business to religion and entertainment. The environment was a pivotal issue in all three of the decade's U.S. presidential elections, commanded more congressional attention than any issue except the economy and health care, and was the subject of government action and debate worldwide. During the past decade, [businesses embraced green initiatives](#)¹, [religious leaders](#)² declared environmental stewardship a moral imperative, and stars from [Hollywood](#)³ to [Nashville](#)⁴ promoted the virtues of green living and environmental protection.

2. Climate Change

Climate change, and particularly human-generated [global warming](#)⁵, has been the topic of more scientific research, political debate, media attention and public concern than any environmental issue of the past 10 years. A truly global issue that demands a global solution, climate change has sparked worldwide concern, but so far has failed to inspire world leaders to set aside their national agendas and work together to craft an international strategy.

3. Overpopulation

Between 1959 and 1999, the global population doubled, growing from 3 billion to 6 billion in just 40 years. According to current projections, the world population will expand to 9 billion by 2040, which will lead to severe shortages of food, water and energy, and dramatic increases in malnutrition and disease. [Overpopulation](#)⁶ is also expected to exacerbate other environmental problems, such as climate change, loss of wildlife habitat, deforestation, and air and water pollution.

4. Global Water Crisis

About one third of the world population, one in every three people on Earth, suffers from a [scarcity of fresh water](#)⁷—a crisis that will only get worse as the population increases unless new sources of fresh water are developed. At present, we're not even doing a good job of using and preserving the sources we already have. According to the United Nations, for example, 95 percent of the world's cities still dump raw sewage into their water supplies.

5. Big Oil and Big Coal versus Clean Energy

Our use of renewable energy grew significantly during the past decade, even as Big Oil and Big Coal continued to push their products as the answer to most of the world's energy needs. With the end of global oil supplies not far off, the oil industry's claims sound like a swan song. Big Coal still supplies most of the electricity used in the United States, China and many other nations, but coal has other problems. A major [coal ash](#)⁸ spill at a Tennessee power plant in 2008 focused attention on inadequate disposal methods for toxic coal waste. Meanwhile, [mountaintop mining](#)⁹ scarred the landscape of Appalachia and other coal-rich regions of the U.S.

and sparked a growing protest movement that attracted national media and political attention.

6. Endangered Species

Every 20 minutes on Earth, another animal species dies out, never to be seen again. At the current rate of extinction, more than 50 percent of all living species will be gone by the end of the century. Scientists believe that we are in the midst of the sixth great extinction to occur on this planet. The first wave of the current extinction may have started as long as 50,000 years ago, but the accelerated pace is largely due to human influences such as overpopulation, loss of habitat, global warming and species exploitation. According to author Jeff Corwin, the black market for rare animal parts—such as shark fins for soup and African elephant ivory—is the third-largest illegal trade in the world, exceeded only by weapons and drugs.

7. Nuclear Energy

[Chernobyl](#)¹⁰ and Three Mile Island chilled U.S. enthusiasm for widespread use of nuclear energy, but this was the decade that the chill began to thaw. The United States already gets 70 percent of its non-carbon generated electricity from nuclear power, and even some environmentalists have started to concede that nuclear energy will inevitably play an important role in future U.S. and global energy and climate strategies—despite ongoing concerns about the lack of a long-term solution for safe and secure nuclear waste disposal.

8. China

China is the world's most populous country, and during the past decade it surpassed the United States as the nation that emits the most greenhouse gas emissions—a problem that could get worse as China builds more coal-fired power plants and more Chinese trade their bicycles for cars. China is home to several cities with the world's worst air quality as well as some of the world's most polluted rivers. In addition, China has been named a source of [cross-border pollution](#)¹¹ for Japan, South Korea, and other Asian countries. On the bright side, China has [invested billions of dollars](#)¹² in environmental protection, pledged to [reduce greenhouse gas emissions](#)¹³, moved to [phase out](#)¹⁴ incandescent light bulbs, and [banned](#)¹⁵ the use of plastic bags.

9. Food Safety and Chemical Contamination

From [phthalates in cosmetics](#)¹⁶ to C-8 in cookware and other non-stick items to [bisphenol A](#)¹⁷ (BPA) in thousands of everyday products, consumers have become increasingly concerned about the variety of under-regulated and under-researched chemicals and other additives they and their families are exposed to every day. Throw in food safety issues such as [genetically modified crops](#)¹⁸, food tainted with *salmonella* and *E.coli* bacteria, milk and other food containing hormones or antibiotics, [baby formula laced with perchlorate](#)¹⁹ (a chemical used in rocket fuel and explosives), and it's no wonder consumers are worried.

10. Pandemics and Superbugs

The decade saw growing concerns about possible pandemics and new or resistant viruses and bacteria—such as [avian flu](#)²⁰, swine flu and the so-called [superbugs](#)²¹—many of them rooted in environmental causes related to such things as factory farming. Superbugs, for example, are created by the proliferation of antibiotics caused by everything from doctors prescribing antibiotics when they aren't warranted to the widespread and unnecessary use of antibiotic soap. But some 70 percent of antibiotics are fed to healthy pigs, poultry and cattle, and end up in our food and water supply.

This About.com page has been optimized for print. To view this page in its original form, please visit:

<http://environment.about.com/od/environmentalevents/tp/top-environmental-issues-2000-2009.htm>

©2010 About.com, Inc., a part of [The New York Times Company](#). All rights reserved.

Links in this article:

1. <http://environment.about.com/od/governmentcorporations/a/uscap.htm>

2. <http://environment.about.com/b/2008/03/10/religious-leaders-call-for-action-on-global-warming.htm>
3. <http://environment.about.com/od/globalwarming/a/dicaprio.htm>
4. http://environment.about.com/od/activismvolunteering/a/sheryl_crow.htm
5. http://environment.about.com/od/faqglobalwarming/tp/gw_faq.htm
6. <http://environment.about.com/b/2009/03/23/population-growth-expected-to-cause-a-food-water-and-energy-crisis-by-2030.htm>
7. <http://environment.about.com/od/biodiversityconservation/a/watersupply.htm>
8. <http://environment.about.com/b/2009/06/30/epa-reveals-locations-of-secret-coal-ash-storage-sites.htm>
9. <http://environment.about.com/od/fossilfuels/f/what-is-mountaintop-mining.htm>
10. <http://environment.about.com/b/2008/04/23/chernobyl-nuclear-accident.htm>
11. http://environment.about.com/od/pollution/a/cross_border.htm
12. <http://environment.about.com/b/2006/07/19/china-to-invest-175-billion-in-environmental-protection-over-five-years.htm>
13. <http://environment.about.com/b/2009/11/26/china-promises-to-cut-greenhouse-gas-emissions.htm>
14. <http://environment.about.com/b/2007/10/04/china-latest-nation-to-pledge-change-to-energy-efficient-lighting.htm>
15. <http://environment.about.com/b/2009/06/01/china-plastic-bag-ban-shows-strong-results-after-first-year.htm>
16. <http://environment.about.com/od/healthenvironment/a/phthalates.htm>
17. <http://environment.about.com/od/healthenvironment/f/what-is-bisphenol-a.htm>
18. http://environment.about.com/od/healthenvironment/a/modified_foods.htm
19. <http://environment.about.com/b/2009/04/03/rocket-fuel-chemical-found-in-baby-formula-and-drinking-water.htm>
20. <http://environment.about.com/b/2006/06/24/human-to-human-transmission-of-bird-flu-confirmed.htm>
21. <http://environment.about.com/od/healthenvironment/a/superbugs.htm>