

# NORTH BY NORTHEAST



By Allen Wicken

## 'The End of Nature' ...and the critical need to prevent a real world sequel

Last Saturday afternoon, I found myself sitting on the hardwood floor of a gymnasium at the University of Maine, Farmington with 25 or 30 other earnest and like-minded folks as we formed a large number five so a photographer perched above one of the basketball backboards could take our picture and download it to the Web site [www.350.org](http://www.350.org). Curious, eh?

Adding to that curiosity were additional dozens of students and elders to our right and our left forming a large "3" and an equally large "0" as well. Together we formed a human rendition of the number "350." We were far from alone that day. Thousands of other groups around the world, in over 170 countries, were doing similar (and some simply must be described as spectacular) representations of the number 350 during this "International Day of Climate Action."

Okay, so what's with the number 350? And why make



a big deal about that number now...you may be wondering.

Stepping back a bit, "The End of Nature" is the title of environmental science writer Bill McKibben's landmark 1989 book that for the first time clearly and convincingly, described the phenomenon of global warming, more recently referred to as global climate change, and its acceleration for the last 200 years.

Last spring, I heard Bill speak at UMF to a packed auditorium of students and elders who have admired his insightful and research-based environmental writing and activism for years. He energized everyone in the room to do their part to heighten global awareness on Oct. 24. By all accounts the day has done just that, thanks to the efforts of hundreds of thousands of thoughtful and concerned citizens around the world.

In that evening's speech to a rapt audience, he renewed his message with reams of new data that pointed to the fact that our decades of increasing the burning of fossil fuels to, in effect, fuel the world's economies has pushed our planet close to a disastrous precipice. It is all related to that number 350, it turns out.

Solid, replicated scientific research has now shown us that for millions of years, the concentration of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) in the earth's atmosphere has been hovering around the life-sustaining concentration of 275 parts per million. The industrial age, going on for the relatively miniscule last 200 years or so, has pushed that concentration to today's 390 ppm, a number that is now increasing by an alarming 2 ppm each year!

It has been determined by researchers worldwide that 350 ppm is the upper limit of global atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentration that can sustain a relatively healthy and stable planet as we move forward. We need to get back to 350 ppm or lower in the next decade or two, before the phenomenon becomes essentially irreversible. The longer we wait on a worldwide basis, the harder the task will be. It is already going to be a tough row to hoe, however the needed actions must be underway very soon.

The timing of last weekend's International Day of Climate Action was critical. We all know that we can, and should, make individual changes to reduce our personal carbon footprint, so to speak. But it is the actions and policies of entire nations that will make the biggest

difference. In December, Copenhagen, Denmark will be the site of a major international conference on climate change. It may be our last best chance to turn this global oil-burning ship around.

The day of action was designed to send a powerful and significant message to world leaders and politicians that the people of all nations see this as a priority... even though it may be an abstraction to most. I urge you to go to [www.350.org](http://www.350.org) to get a real sense of the worldwide concerns as expressed by thousands of "actions" that took place everywhere for New Zealand to Senegal, and from Botswana to Farmington, Maine.

I realize that all of this, to many Mainers, is just a bunch of numbers and what may seem to simply be a "the sky is falling" argument. It is hard to be concerned when we look outside and the sky is clear, and the winters seem to be just as cold as ever.

This is also hard for most folks to get worked up about when there have been many more close-to-home reasons for concern given the jolts that have been administered to our personal economic situations and grim predictions for our ongoing economic security as well.

In fact, a recently announced national poll by the respected Pew Research Center for the People and the Press indicated that the concern about global warming has dropped about 20 percent nationally in the last two to three years. Most analysts feel that this drop is again due to Americans more understandably focused on more pressing economic concerns, with unemployment being the most disconcerting. When people have increased and more pressing day-to-day worries, these more global issues become less important, and less worthy of concern.

I guess my point is this: There may be some challenging years ahead as our nation, and the world, sorts through, and addresses, this global and close-to-home economic turmoil. Yet I am confident that the economic future remains reasonably positive as we individually and as a nation, must ratchet down our expectations as a consumption-driven society, and hold the feet of the financial markets most greedy, to the fire. Yet, I am not as confident that the overall health of our planet, and its inhabitants, is assured if the world's leaders don't make some hard, and necessary, changes in our energy policies and excessive use of non-renewable energy sources... and make them very soon.

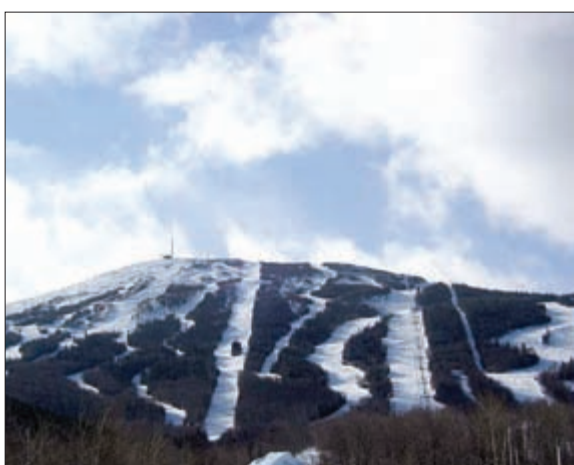
All of us have the responsibility to keep ourselves informed on these issues, and in like manner, make our leaders accountable to "do the right thing," as it were. It is our children's (and their children's) world that is truly at stake... more than our own.

The sky is certainly not falling... but it, very literally, is changing and not in a better, life-sustaining way. We all have to be responsible in helping to assure that this progression is reversed. I hope that sitting on a college gym floor, joining with others to form the number "5" during the International Day of Climate Action will help, in a small but heartfelt way... to do just that.

"We need to write, otherwise nobody will know who we are," Garrison Keillor

Per usual, your thoughts and comments are welcome. Jot them down on a recycled piece of paper and place it inside a signed copy of Bill McKibben's 2007 book: "Hope, Human, and Wild: True Stories of Living Lightly on the Earth" and place it inside the log door of our mudroom on the west shore of Gull Pond... or simply launch an email to [allenwicken@yahoo.com](mailto:allenwicken@yahoo.com).

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MUST like working with the public.

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NO WALK-INS, NO PHONE CALLS PLEASE.

DEADLINE IS FRIDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2009