Beyond climate change: Reframing the dialogue over environmental issues

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Climate change is a serious concern, but society's focus on it undermines critical efforts to address environmental degradation and sustainability in the broad sense. Climate scientist John M. Wallace urges the dialogue over environmental issues to be reframed to better address all environmental issues

TRAVELING in India the past two months has impressed on me the breadth and urgency of the world’s environmental crisis. After decades of sustained growth following the “green revolution” in the 1960s, Indian crop yields no longer keep up with population growth.

Topsoil is becoming depleted of natural chemical nutrients so that increasing applications of chemical fertilizers are required to sustain high crop yields. Cropland is being lost to urbanization and topsoil is being stripped from fields to make bricks. Excess nitrogen from fertilizers in the runoff is polluting rivers and wetlands. Water tables are plummeting in response to shortsighted management practices such as “water mining” from deep wells to increase yields of dry-season crops.

Some highly regarded Indian ecologists are concerned about the risk of future biodiversity losses because of the introduction of genetically engineered plant species. India’s tiger population is reportedly down to about 1,400. People are sickened by toxic waste from factories producing goods for consumption in developed countries. The list goes on.

Media coverage of India’s looming environmental crisis has been eclipsed by the debate about long-term future impacts of global climate change. The revelation that the Himalayan glaciers are not retreating as rapidly as reported in the Fourth Assessment Report of the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has been front-page news in India day after day. Readers of these news stories could easily come away with the impression that the immediacy of the environmental crisis has been exaggerated when, in fact, it is not being given sufficient emphasis.
It’s tempting to blame the media for fixating on global warming, but we climate scientists are partly to blame for the misplaced emphasis. Over the past 20 years we have stood by and watched as governmental and nongovernmental organizations that deal with environmental issues became more and more narrowly focused on the long-term impacts of global warming.

Meanwhile, more imminent issues relating to the sustainability of our planet’s life-support system under the pressures of growing human population and the widening gap between rich and poor are not getting the attention they deserve.

By failing to foster creation of robust, broad-based advisory mechanisms, we have allowed the IPCC assessment reports to become the dominant vehicle for representing the views of the scientific community on a widening range of environmental issues. In the IPCC terminology, symptoms of environmental degradation, regardless of their cause, are labeled as impacts of climate change, and the societal response to them is framed in terms of mitigating and adapting to climate change.

Scientists still write papers and speak to the media about environmental concerns outside of the purview of the IPCC, but with so much of the world’s attention riveted on climate change there is a lack of institutional infrastructure for calling attention to other issues.

Labeling issues such as reduced agricultural productivity, loss of biodiversity, pollution and the looming shortage of fresh water as “impacts of global warming” leaves the public confused and susceptible to propaganda by groups who oppose environmental regulation of any kind. With the IPCC increasingly in the spotlight, the denialists can trivialize the entire environmental crisis simply by casting doubt on the scientific consensus on global warming.

Climate scientists and their detractors are slugging it out every day in blogs and editorial pages while legislative initiatives to get governments to address environmental and resource issues remain stalled, despite broad public support for them.

At the recent Copenhagen Summit, the nations of the world were reluctant to make binding agreements to reduce their production of greenhouse gases. Given the limited public understanding of the intricacies of climate science, the human tendency to be more concerned with current issues than with what the climate will be like 100 years from now, and the glaring inequities in per capita fossil fuel consumption between countries like the United States and those like India, justifying an enlightened energy policy on the basis of concerns about global warming is a tough sell.
The negotiations might have gone better had the justification been framed in terms of conserving the world’s dwindling oil reserves, stabilizing oil prices and promoting energy independence.

The current stalemate is likely to persist as long as scientists allow climate change to dominate the environmental policy agenda. In order to promote a more productive dialogue between scientists and policymakers, the discussion of adaptation and mitigation options in the policy arena needs to be reframed so that it addresses environmental degradation and sustainability in the broad sense, not just the impacts of climate change.