

## Neglecting Mother Earth

Written by

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by Derrick Z. Jackson

Last week, a 37-year-old man in a caffeine craze parked his Hummer in a Back Bay loading zone. By the time he rushed in and out of Starbucks, a meter maid was writing out a ticket. The driver was so outraged, he allegedly threw the scalding cup at the meter maid. She got first-degree burns on her face. The man said he merely slipped on the ice. Police so far believe the meter maid and charged him with assault with a deadly weapon.

This week, researchers at Yale and Columbia, in collaboration with the World Economic Forum, published its latest index of global environmental stewardship. Out of 146 nations, the United States, the world's richest nation, ranked only 45th for protecting the environment.

This is even more ridiculous based on who is ahead of us. The United States, with a gross domestic product of \$37,800, according to the CIA World Handbook, trails Gabon, Peru, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Bolivia, Colombia, Albania, Central African Republic, Panama, Namibia, Russia, Botswana, Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, Congo, Mali, Chile, Bhutan, and Armenia. Those 19 nations all have GDPs of under \$10,000, going as low as Bhutan's \$1,300, the Central African Republic's \$1,100, Mali's \$900, and Congo's \$700. The average American has 54 times more money in GDP terms than the average person in Congo. Yet the Congolese exhibit better stewardship of the planet.

An angry man in one of America's largest gas-guzzling cars in one of the most chronically congested parts of the city throws some of the nation's most expensive coffee at a working-class woman.

At the same time, we receive yet more evidence how we blow smoke in the face of the world with our pollution and refuse to join the other 136 nations and regional economic groups that signed the international Kyoto agreement on global warming. The incivility at home and arrogance abroad makes for one ugly American.

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On environmental stewardship, it is easy to forget that in the 1970s, the United States led the world in cleaning up air pollution, said Marc Levy, associate director of Columbia University's Center for International Earth Science Information Network, one of the authors of the 2005 Environmental Sustainability Index. "Europe was way behind us," Levy said over the telephone yesterday. "Our big advance in the '70s was clear targets on air quality, with incentives and punishments, putting catalytic converters in cars and smokestack scrubbers in industrial plants. But we pretty much stopped there. In the past 10 years, Europe has passed us and we're 50 percent below most countries over there on average."

Levy said that Europe has vaulted past us with far more strategic efforts to promote rail transportation, reduce coal burning, and recycling solid waste, all of which are stifled in the United States by special-interest lobbying that turns politicians into cowards and wrongfully convinces working-class workers that less pollution means less jobs.

"There is absolutely no reason we cannot move to levels other countries have already shown to be possible," Levy said. "We don't have to keep filling landfills and churning up the incinerators the way we do."

"The striking thing on the positive side is that we're still not only the world leader but remain far ahead of the rest of the world in the science and technology available to us. If we put our resources to work effectively, we may not only get our own house in order but help alleviate things globally."

Five years ago, poor standings in a pilot version of the index sparked a cabinet-level review of environmental practices in Mexico. In 2002, bad rankings moved the governments of South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, the Philippines, and Belgium to also conduct policy reviews.

Those nations, Levy said, took the index as a "slap in the face." So far, Levy said, the United States under the Bush administration has shown no interest in the

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index.

Stewardship, as defined by Bush, was taking a draft report by the Environmental Protection Agency and deleting the part that specifically mentioned vehicle exhaust and industrial pollution as major factors in global warming. In his second inaugural address, Bush talked at length about spreading liberty throughout the world. We can grant no liberty when we enslave the planet to our consumption.

The United States refuses to stop hogging resources. A man in a giant car in a dense neighborhood refuses to accept the result of hogging an illegal space. The United States leads the world in heating up the planet. The man burns a woman's face. Globally and locally, we are creating a fiery place.