

Driving global warming: The machines for burning gasoline

by [Bill McKibben](#) in the [May 16, 2001](#) issue

Up until some point in the 1960s, people of a certain class routinely belonged to segregated country clubs without giving it much thought—it was “normal.” And then, in the space of a few years, those memberships became immoral. As a society, we’d crossed some threshold where the benefits—a good place to play golf, a nice pool for the kids, business contacts, a sense of status and belonging—had to be weighed against the recognition that racial discrimination was evil. Belonging to Farflung Acres CC wasn’t the same as bombing black churches (perfectly sweet and decent people did it) and quitting wasn’t going to change the economic or social patterns of the whole society, but it had become an inescapable symbol. Either you cared enough about the issue of race to make a stand and or you didn’t. If you thought we were all made in God’s image, and that Jesus had died to save us all, it was the least you could do.

For the past decade, buying a sport utility vehicle—an Explorer, a Navigator, a CRV, a Suburban, a Rover, and so on down the list—has seemed perfectly normal. Most people of a certain station did it. If you went to a grocery store in suburban Boston, you would think that reaching it required crossing flooded rivers and climbing untracked canyons. In any given parking lot, every other vehicle has four-wheel drive, 18 inches of clearance, step-up bumpers. They come with a lot of other features: leather seats, surround sound, comfort, status. Maybe even some sense of connection with nature, for they’ve been advertised as a way to commune with creation.

But now we’ve come to another of those threshold moments. In January, after five years of exhaustive scientific study, the International Panel on Climate Change announced the consensus of the world’s leading experts: if we keep burning fossil fuels at anything like our present rate, the planet will warm four or five degrees, and perhaps as much as 11 degrees, before the century is out. Those temperatures would top anything we’ve seen for hundreds of millions of years. Already we can

guess the effects. The decade we've just come through was the warmest on record in human history: it saw record incidence of floods and drought (both of which you'd expect with higher temperatures). Arctic ice, we now know, has thinned 40 percent in the last 40 years. Sea level is rising steadily.

And what has the SUV to do with all of this? Well, it is mostly a machine for burning gasoline. Say you switched from a normal car to a big sport "ute" and drove it for one year. The extra energy you use would be the equivalent of leaving the door to the fridge open for six years, or your bathroom light on for three decades. Twenty percent of America's carbon dioxide emissions come from automobiles. Even as we've begun to improve efficiency in factories and power plants, our cars and trucks have grown bigger and more wasteful: average fuel efficiency actually declined in the 1990s, even as engineers came up with one technology after another that could have saved gas. That's a big reason why Americans now produce 12 percent more CO₂, the main global warming gas, than they did when Bill Clinton took office.

If you drive an SUV, then you're "driving" global warming, even more than the rest of us.

In Bangladesh people spent three months of 1998 living in the thigh-deep water that covered two-thirds of the nation. The inundation came because the Bay of Bengal was some inches higher than normal (as climate changes, sea level rises because warm water takes up more space). That high water blocked the drainage of the normal summer floods, turning the nation into a vast lake. No one can say exactly how much higher that water was because of our recent fondness for semi-military transport in the suburbs. Maybe an inch, who knows?

But the connection is clear. If you care about the people in this world living closest to the margins, then you need to do everything in your power to slow the rate at which the planet warms, for they are the most vulnerable. I was naked and you did not clothe me. I was hungry and you drowned me with your Ford Explorer.

Here's more: Coral reefs the world over are dying as warmer sea water bleaches them to death—by some estimates, this whole amazing ecosystem, this whole lovely corner of God's brain, may be extinct by mid-century. In the far north, scientists recently found that polar bears were 20 percent scrawnier than they'd been just a few years before. As pack ice disappears, they can't hunt the seals that form the basis of their diet. And on and on—according to many experts, the extinction spasm

caused by climate change and other environmental degradation in this century will equal or surpass those caused by crashing asteroids in geological times. But this time it's us doing the crashing.

If we care about creation, if we understand the blooming earth as an exhibit of what pleases God, then we've got to do what we can to slow these massive changes. "Where were you when I set the boundaries of the oceans, and told the proud waves here you shall come and no further?" God asks Job. We can either spit in the old geezer's face and tell him we're in charge of sea level from here on out, or we can throttle back, learn to live a little differently.

Not so differently. Giving up SUVs is not exactly a return to the Stone Age. After all, we didn't have them a decade ago, when people with large families transported themselves in considerably more fuel-efficient minivans or station wagons. The only reason we have them now is that the car companies make immense profits from them. Ford's lucky to clear a grand selling you an Escort, but there's \$10,000 clear profit in an Explorer. Save for a very few special circumstances, we don't need them—nine in ten SUVs never even leave the pavement. Where I live, in the Adirondack mountains of New York, we have snow and ice six months of the year, bad roads and steep mountains. But we don't have many SUVs because no one has the money to buy one. Somehow we still get around.

Sometimes people cite safety as their cause for buying a behemoth. They reason that they need them is because everyone else has them or because in an accident the other car will suffer more (a position that would probably not pass the test with many Christian ethicists). But even that's a flawed argument. It's true, says the *New York Times*, that in a collision an SUV is twice as likely as a car to kill the other driver. But because the things roll over so easily, overall "their occupants have roughly the same chance as car occupants of dying in a crash."

The big car companies are starting to sense that their franchise for mayhem is running out. Last fall, after fuel prices soared and exploding tires killed dozens, the big car companies said that half a decade from now they would try to increase their fuel efficiency by 25 percent. Which is actually a nice start, but also sort of like the country club board of directors saying, "Wait five years and we'll find a few token blacks." Twenty-five percent better than 13 miles per hour is still a sick joke. Already Toyota and Honda have hybrid vehicles on the lot that can get 50, 60, 70 miles to the gallon. And we don't have five or ten or 15 years to wait.

No, the time has come to make the case in the strongest terms. Not to harass those who already own SUVs—in a way, they're the biggest victims, since they get to live in the same warmer world as the rest of us, but have each sent 40 grand to Detroit to boot. But it's time to urge everyone we know to stop buying them. Time to join the SUV protest in Boston on June 2. Time to pass petitions around church pews collecting pledges not to buy the things in the future. Time to organize your friends and neighbors to picket outside the auto dealerships, reminding buyers to ask about gas mileage, steering them away from the monster trucks.

Time, in short, to say that this is a moral issue every bit as compelling as the civil rights movement of a generation ago, and every bit as demanding of our commitment and our sacrifice. It's not a technical question—it's about desire, status, power, willingness to change, openness to the rest of creation. It can't be left to the experts—the experts have had it for a decade now, and we're pouring ever more carbon into the atmosphere. It's time for all of us to take it on, as uncomfortable as that may be.

Calling it a moral issue does not mean we need to moralize. Every American is implicated in the environmental crisis—there are plenty of other indulgences we could point at in our own lives, from living in oversized houses to boarding jets on a whim. But there's no symbol much clearer in our time than SUVs. Stop driving global warming. If we can't do even that, we're unlikely ever to do much.