Is global warming really affecting people now? And where can we see these effects? The answers to these questions are “yes” and “all over the world.”

The year 2007 was the sixth hottest in Australian (recorded) history. People there had to endure bushfires, floods, intense storms and droughts. The European heat wave of 2003 killed 22,000 – 35,000 people. The Arctic region has experienced a temperature rise of 1°C to 3°C over the last 50 years, and Canada, Alaska and Russia are experiencing melting of permafrost.

Hurricanes in the Atlantic Ocean were thought to be an entirely North Atlantic phenomenon. In late March 2004, the first Atlantic cyclone to form south of the equator hit Brazil with 144 km/h winds.

In Tanzania, there used to be a drought about every 10 years. Now droughts are more frequent and so is the flooding. Areas which were never affected by mosquitoes now are. The rains come at the wrong time for farmers, causing many problems.

Climate change may be one of the causes of the Darfur conflict (crisis in western Sudan). The reduction in rainfall has turned millions of hectares of grazing land into desert, forcing the Arab nomads to move south to fight over land already occupied by other people.

Predictions

Predictions for the future include extreme weather, an expansion of tropical diseases, and drastic economic impact. What does this all mean? There is likely to be less food as droughts and rising temperatures can create deserts in some areas. Forest fires may occur more regularly. People may fight more over food and land. There could be an increase in diseases carried by insects such as tick encephalitis and malaria as regions become warmer. Higher temperatures will also increase the demand for water. Some researchers predict that over 50% of animal and plant species may die out.

Many of the world’s largest and most prosperous cities are on the coast, and it will be difficult to protect them against the rising sea levels. Low-lying countries such as Bangladesh and the Netherlands would be worst hit. Hotter temperatures are expected to have a direct impact on your health. They can increase the number of people who die for many reasons because the heart has to work harder to keep the body cool. Doctors warn that global warming could mean more cardiovascular disease. With all these scary predictions, it is no wonder more and more people are trying to support efforts to reduce global warming.

Kyoto – yes or no?

Do you remember the fuss created when the United States government decided not to sign the Kyoto Agreement? This international plan is supposed to reduce greenhouse gases (that is, to reduce putting polluting gases into the air, which causes the atmosphere to heat up abnormally) and help the environment.

At the meeting in Kyoto, Japan, in 1997, many countries signed an agreement, now called the Kyoto Agreement, which committed the countries to reduce their emissions from 2008 to 2012, and to prove it with statistics. However, only developed countries were required to reduce emissions. The largest, fastest-growing countries in the world – China, India, and Brazil – did not have to do anything; they could continue polluting as usual. At the same time, the US, which was responsible for 25% of all greenhouse gas emissions, was assigned to cut far too much fuel usage in a very short time, according to the government administration of President
George Bush. Nonetheless, many people believe that after Bush leaves office at the end of 2008, the new president may be willing to sign, too.

People say – yes!

Politicians are often not very eager to implement expensive measures to cut emissions. In spite of this, ordinary people have been working on their own for decades to reduce pollution.

One program that helps the environment in the US is called Best Workplaces for Commuters. In this program, employers help employees find better ways to get to work, and driving alone to the job. It encourages companies to offer the car and driving alone to the workplace plan because funds to help pay for a van to and from work.

Many people dream of electric cars, but a Swiss teacher who was assigned to cut far too much fuel was eager to match up price ones (take turns driving each other to work). In this program, the car pulls a trailer loaded with six square meters of solar panels. The panels absorb sunlight and produce electricity. The power is then fed into a battery which drives the car. It took Palmer three years to build his car, with the assistance of scientists at four universities and financial help from 15 Swiss companies. The car can cover 100 km a day.

Mary Matz (USA)

The future

In the meantime, countries continue to meet and discuss plans for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The latest meeting, held in Bali, lasted two weeks in December 2007. The result? Participants agreed to continue negotiating during 2008–09 in order to come up with an international agreement on what should happen next, after the original Kyoto Agreement “dies” in 2012. Hana Škrdlová (Canada), Mary Matz (USA)

DISCUSS:

• Do you consider climate change a serious problem? Do you think governments are doing enough to deal with the problem?
• What parts of the Best Workplaces for Commuters program do you find most interesting? Which would work best in your area?
• What do you, personally, do to help the environment?

Rainfalls cause disastrous flooding in Bangladesh.

Glossary

nomad – a member of a community that moves with its animals from place to place
commuter – someone who regularly travels between work and home
wind turbine – a tall structure with blades (= wide flat parts on a machine) that are blown round by the wind and produce energy