

## Road to ruin

America produces a quarter of the world's carbon dioxide emissions, the population has risen by 100 million since 1970 and when an area three times the size of Britain was recently opened up for mining, drilling, logging and road building, no one took much notice. What does the Bush administration do? It ignores all attempts to curb environmental damage. In a major investigation that took him from the Salton Sea in California to Crooked Creek in Florida, Matthew Engel reports on how America is ravaging the planet

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A dead fish lies on salt sediment at the edge of the Salton sea, in southern California, where salinity levels are 25% higher than those of ocean water. Photograph: Damian Dovarganes/AP

On the map of the United States, just below halfway down the east coast, you can see a series of islets, in the shape of a hooked nose. These are the Outer Banks, barrier islands - sun-kissed in summer, storm-tossed in winter - that stretch for 100 miles and more, protecting the main coastline of the state of North Carolina. They are built, quite literally, on shifting sands.

Twenty years ago, these were, by all accounts, magical places, hard to reach and discovered only by the adventurous and discerning. They are still fairly magical, at least the seemingly endless stretch of unspoiled beach is. It is the lure of that which causes the traffic jams on the only two bridges every Saturday throughout the summer. The narrow strip of land behind the beach, however, has been built up with enormous holiday homes, costing up to \$2m (£1.2m) each. And prices rose by 15-20% (25% for those on the ocean front) in 2002 alone, according to one agent.

This is what local agents call "a very nice market", and last month their area had a week of free worldwide publicity. Hurricane Isabel swept in, washing out much of the islands' only road and picking up motels from their foundations and tossing them, according to one report, "like cigarette butts". One island was turned into several islets, with a whole town, Hatteras Village, being cut off from the rest of the US - for ever, if nature has its way.

Residents, journalists reported, were in shock. Many scientists were not. Speaking well before Isabel, Dr Orrin Pilkey, professor emeritus of geology at Duke University in North Carolina, described the Outer Banks property boom to me as "a form of societal

madness". "I wouldn't buy a house on the front row of the Outer Banks. Or the second," agreed Dr Stephen Leatherman, who is such a connoisseur of American coastlines that he is known as Dr Beach.

For the market is not the only thing that has been rising round here. Like other experts, Pilkey expects the Atlantic to inundate the existing beaches "within two to four generations". Normally, that would be no problem for the sands, which would simply regroup and re-form further back. Unfortunately, that is no longer possible: the \$2m houses are in the way. According to Pilkey, the government will either have to build millions of dollars worth of seawall, which will destroy the beach anyway, or demolish the houses. "Coastal scientists from abroad come here and just shake their heads in disbelief," he says.

The madness of the Outer Banks seems like a symptom of, and a metaphor for, something far broader: the US is in denial about what is, beyond any question, potentially its most dangerous enemy. While millions of words have been written every day for the past two years about the threat from vengeful Islamic terrorists, the threat from a vengeful Nature has been almost wholly ignored. Yet the likelihood of multiple attacks in the future is far more certain.

Earlier this year, just before he was fired as environment minister, Michael Meacher gave a speech in Newcastle, saying: "There is a lot wrong with our world. But it is not as bad as people think. It is actually worse." He listed five threats to the survival of the planet: lack of fresh water, destruction of forest and crop land, global warming, overuse of natural resources and the continuing rise in the population. What Meacher could not say, or he would have been booted out more quickly, was that the US is a world leader in hastening each of these five crises, bringing its gargantuan appetite to the business of ravaging the planet. American politicians do not talk this way. Even Al Gore, supposedly the most committed environmentalist in world politics, kept quiet about the subject when chasing the presidency in 2000.

Those of us without a degree in climatology can have no sensible opinion on the truth about climate change, except to sense that the weather does seem to have become a little weird lately. Yet in America the subject has become politicised, with rightwing commentators decrying global warming as "bogus science". They gloated when it snowed unusually hard in Washington last winter (failing to notice the absence of snow in Alaska). When the dissident "good news" scientist Bjorn Lomborg spoke to a conservative Washington thinktank he was applauded not merely rapturously, but fawningly.

While newspapers report that Kilimanjaro's icecap is melting and Greenland's glaciers are crumbling, the US government has been telling its scientific advisers to do more research before it can consider any action to restrict greenhouse gases; the scientists reported back that they had done all the research. The attitude of the White House to global warming was summed up by the online journalist Mickey Kaus as: "It's not true! It's not true! And we can't do anything about it!" What terrifies all American politicians, deep down, is that it is true and that they could do something about it, but at horrendous cost to American industry and lifestyle.

In the meantime, all American consumers have been asked to do is to buy Ben & Jerry's One Sweet Whirled ice cream, ensuring that a portion of Unilever's profits go towards "global warming initiatives". Wow!

Potential Democratic candidates for the presidential nomination have been testing environmental issues a little in the past few weeks. Some activists are hopeful that the newly elected Governor Schwarzenegger of California is genuinely interested. But, in truth, despite the Soviet-style politicisation of science, serious national debate on the issue ceased years ago.

Of course, nimbyism is alive and well. And, sure, there are localised battles between greens and their corporate enemies: towns in Alabama try to resist corporate poisoning; contests go on to preserve the habitats of everything from the grizzly bear to rare types of fly; Californians hug trees to stop new housing estates. Sometimes the greenies win, though they have been losing with increasing frequency, especially if Washington happens to be involved. These fights, even in agglomeration, are not the real issue. Day after day across America the green agenda is being lost - and then, usually, being buried under concrete.

"We're waging a war on the environment, a very successful one," says Paul Ehrlich, professor of population studies at Stanford University. "This nation is devouring itself," according to Phil Clapp of the National Environmental Trust. These are voices that have almost ceased to be heard in the US. Yet with each passing day, the gap between the US and the rest of the planet widens. To take the figure most often trotted out: Americans contribute a quarter of the world's carbon dioxide emissions. To meet the seemingly modest Kyoto objective of reducing emissions to 7% below their 1990 levels by 2012, they would actually (due to growth) have to cut back by a third. For the Bush White House, this is not even on the horizon, never mind the agenda.

Why has the leader of the free world opted out? The first reason lies deep in the national psyche. The old world developed on the basis of a coalition - uneasy but understood - between humanity and its surroundings. The settlement of the US was based on conquest, not just of the indigenous peoples, but also of the terrain. It appears to be, thus far, one of the great success stories of modern history.

"Remember, this country is built very heavily on the frontier ethic," says Clapp. "How America moved west was to exhaust the land and move on. The original settlers, such as the Jefferson family, moved westward because families like theirs planted tobacco in tidewater Virginia and exhausted the soil. My own ancestors did the same in Indiana."

Americans made crops grow in places that are entirely arid. They built dams - about 250,000 of them. They built great cities, with skyscrapers and symphony orchestras, in places that appeared barely habitable. They shifted rivers, even reversed their flow. "It's the American belief that with enough hard work and perseverance anything - be it a force of nature, a country or a disease - can be vanquished," says Clapp. "It's a country founded on the idea of no limits. The essence of environmentalism is that

there are indeed limits. It's one of the reasons environmentalism is a stronger ethic in Europe than in the US."

There is a second reason: the staggering population growth of the US. It is approaching 300 million, having gone up from 200 million in 1970, which was around the time President Nixon set up a commission to consider the issue, the last time any US administration has dared think about it. A million new legal migrants are coming in every year (never mind illegals), and the US Census Bureau projections for 2050, merely half a lifetime away, is 420 million. This is a rate of increase far beyond anything else in the developed world, and not far behind Brazil, India, or indeed Mexico.

This issue is political dynamite, although not for quite the same reasons as in Britain. Almost every political group is split on the issue, including the far right (torn between overt xenophobes such as Pat Buchanan and the free marketeers), the labour movement and the environmentalists. The belief that the US is the best country in the world is a cornerstone of national self-belief, and many Americans still, wholeheartedly, want others to share it. They also want cheap labour to cut the sugar cane, pluck the chickens, pick the oranges, mow the lawns and make the beds.

But the dynamite is most potent among the Hispanic community, the group who will probably decide the destiny of future presidential elections and who do not wish to be told their relatives will not be allowed in or, if illegal, seriously harassed. "Neither party wants to say we should change immigration policy," says John Haaga of the independent Population Reference Bureau. "The phrase being used is 'Hispandering'". Yet extra Americans are not just a problem for the US: they are, in the eyes of many environmentalists, a problem for the world because migrants, in a short span of time, take on American consumption patterns. "Not only don't we have a population policy," says Ehrlich, "we don't have a consumption policy either. We are the most overpopulated country in the world. It's not the number of people. It's their consumption." Ehrlich may be wrong. It is, though, somewhat surprising that the federal government's four million employees do not appear to include anyone charged with even thinking about this issue.

This brings us to the third factor: the Bush administration, the first government in modern history which has systematically disavowed the systems of checks and controls that have governed environmental policy since it burst into western political consciousness a generation ago. It would be ludicrous to suggest that Bush is responsible for what is happening to the American environment. The crisis is far more deep-seated than that, and the federal government is too far removed from the minutiae of daily life.

But the Bushies have perfected a technique of announcing regular edicts (often late on a Friday afternoon) rolling back environmental control, usually while pretending to do the opposite. Morale among civil servants at the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington was already close to rock-bottom even before its moderate leader, Christine Todd Whitman, finally threw in her hand in May. Gossip round town was that she had endured two years of private humiliation at the hands of the White House. Few environmentalists have great hopes for her announced successor, the governor of Utah, Mike Leavitt.

What is really alarming is the intellectual atmosphere in Washington. You can attend seminars debunking scientific eco-orthodoxy almost every week. Early in the year, there was much favourable publicity for a new work *Global Warming and Other Eco-myths*, produced by the Competitive Enterprise Institute, an organisation reputedly funded by multinational corporations. Outside Washington, it can be far nastier. "I've never threatened anyone in my life," a conservation activist in Montana complained to the Guardian. "I do know, though, that I have gotten very ugly threats left on my telephone answering machine over the past year, and twice had to scour my sidewalk in front of the building to erase the dead body chalk outlines."

Out in the west, words such as enviro-whackos are popularised by rightwing radio hosts such as the ex-Watergate conspirator Gordon Liddy, who passes on to his millions of listeners the message that global warming is a lie. "I commute in a three-quarter-tonne capacity Chevrolet Silverado HD," he swanked in his latest book. "Four-wheel drive, off-road equipped, extended curb pickup truck, powered by a 300hp, overhead valve, turbo supercharged diesel engine with 520lb-feet of torque... It has lights all over it so everyone can see me coming and get out of the way. If someone in a little government-mandated car hits me, it is all over - for him." Fuel economy in American vehicles hit a 22-year low in 2002.

In this country, green-minded people can't even trust the good guys. The Nature Conservancy, the US's largest environmental group with a million members - with a role not unlike Britain's National Trust - was the subject of an exhaustive exposé in the Washington Post in May, accusing it of sanctioning deals to build "opulent houses on fragile grasslands" and drilling for gas under the last breeding ground of the Attwater's Prairie Chicken, whose numbers have dwindled to just dozens.

On April 22, 1970 more than 20 million people attended the first-ever Earth Day. In New York, Fifth Avenue was closed to traffic and 100,000 people attended an ecology fair in Central Park. The Republican governor of New York wore a Save the Earth button, and Senator John Tower, another Republican, told an audience of Texan oilmen: "Recent efforts on the part of the private sector show promise for pollution abatement and control. Such efforts are in our own best interests..."

So what happened next? The problem for the green movement was not what went wrong, but what went right. Ehrlich's book, *The Population Bomb*, said: "In the 1970s, the world will undergo famines - hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash programmes embarked on now." The famine never came. And after the oil crisis came and went, and Americans began to tire of the gloom-filled, eco-oriented presidency of Jimmy Carter, they turned instead to Ronald Reagan, who proposed simple solutions of tax cuts and deregulation and, lo, the world got more cheerful. With doomsday postponed indefinitely, the politics of the Reagan years have lingered.

Some activists remain bitter about the Clinton White House, which was only patchily interested in green issues. "It left a bad taste in the mouth of the environmental community," says Tim Wirth, a former senator and one-time Clinton official. "They trimmed their sails over and over again. The old House speaker, Tip O'Neill, had a very

important political aphorism: 'Yer dance with the person who brung yer.' They never did." This bitterness was one of the factors that led to the hefty third-party vote for Ralph Nader in 2000, which proved disastrous for Al Gore, the inhibited environmentalist.

In the three years since then, Bush has danced like a dervish with the folks who brung him. Yet, even now, no one dare say out loud that they are against environmentalism: the political wisdom is that the subject can be a voting issue among the suburban moms, ferrying the kids around to baseball practice in their own Chevrolet Silverados. Instead, the big corporations and their political allies have - brilliantly - manipulated the forces that the eco-warriors themselves unleashed and turned them back on their creators. "In the 80s they took all the techniques of citizen advocacy groups and professionalised them," explains Phil Clapp. "That's when you saw the proliferation of lobbyists in Washington. The environmental community never retooled to meet the challenge. They had developed the techniques, but were still doing them in a PTA bake-sale kind of way."

Thus every new measure passed to favour business interests and ease up on pollution regulations is presented in an eco-friendly, sugar-coated, summer's morning kind of way, such as Clear Skies, the weakening of the Clean Air Act. The House of Representatives has just passed the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, presented by the president as an anti-forest fire measure. Opponents say it is simply a gift to the timber industry that will make it extremely difficult to stop the felling of old-growth trees. Another technique is to announce, with great fanfare, initiatives that everyone can applaud, such as a recent one for hydrogen-based cars. We can expect more of these as November 2004 draws closer. When they are scaled back, or delayed, or dropped, there is less publicity. It is a habit that runs in the family. Governor Jeb Bush's grand scheme to save the Florida Everglades was much applauded; the delay from 2006 to 2016 was little noticed.

Even now the White House does not win all its battles. In the Senate, where a small group of greenish New England Republicans has a potential blocking veto, there are moves to compromise on the forests bill. The New England Republicans were largely responsible for Bush's inability to push through his plan to allow oil drilling in the Alaskan wildlife reserve. Occasionally, there is good news: some of the small dams that have impeded the life-cycle of Pacific salmon and steelhead trout are being demolished; there are reports of a new alliance between the old enemies, ranchers and greenies, in New Mexico; renewable energy is under discussion. But some of their policies are already having their effect. Carol Browner, Clinton's head of the EPA, claims the Bush administration has set back the campaign to cut industrial pollution in ways that will last for decades.

"This administration has sent a signal to the polluting community, 'You can get away with bad habits'," says Browner. "State governments in the north-east were much tougher, so the north-eastern power stations upgraded their emissions standards in the 90s whereas the mid-west guys, who are their competitors, didn't. Now they're not enforcing the law."

"So what they're saying to the companies is: 'Don't go early, don't comply with the law first. The rules might change.' Even a company that wants to do the right thing has to look at its bottom line. If they get into a situation like this, they think: 'We spent \$1bn to meet the requirements and our competitors didn't. Yeah, great. We're not going to do that again.'"

Under Bush, the lack of interest at every level has at last come into balance. The US is equally unconcerned globally, federally, statewide and locally. The environmentalists' macro-gloom has been off-beam before, of course. Perhaps global warming is a myth; perhaps the CEI is right and there will be a blue revolution in water use to complement the green revolution. There is probably just as much chance that the next big surprise will be a thrilling one - the arrival of nuclear cold fusion to solve the energy dilemma, say - as a disaster. Maybe biotechnology, pesticides, natural gas and American ingenuity and optimism will indeed see everything right. It does seem like a curiously reckless gamble for the US to be taking, though, staking the future of the planet on the spin of nature's roulette wheel.

But it is only a bigger version of the bet being taken by the home-buyers of North Carolina. In a country supposedly distrustful of government, the Outer Bankers have remarkable faith in their leaders' ability to see them seem right. Post-Isabel, a group of residents there wrote a letter demanding government action so they can protect their livelihoods and families "without the fear of every hurricane or nor'easter cutting us off from the rest of the world". Quite. Who would imagine that in the 21st century the most powerful empire the world has ever known could still be threatened by enemies as pathetically old-fashioned as wind and tide?

Orrin Pilkey thinks it quite possible that sea levels might rise to the point where the Outer Banks will be a minor detail. "We're not going to be worried about North Carolina. We're going to be worrying about Manhattan." Still, macro-catastrophe may never happen. The micro-catastrophe, however, already has: the US is an aesthetic disaster area.

If you fly from Washington to Boston, there are now almost no open spaces below. This is increasingly true in a big U covering both coasts and the sunbelt. In the south-west, the main growth area, bungalows spread for miles over what a decade ago was virgin desert. The population of Arizona increased 40% in the 1990s, that of next-door Nevada 66%. That's, as Natalie Merchant sang, "...the sprawl that keeps crawling its way, 'bout a thousand miles a day", which is not much of an exaggeration.

Every day 5,000 new houses go up in America. Many of these fit the American appetite for size, however small the plot: "McMansions", as they are known. The very word suburb is now old-hat. The reality of life for many people now is the "exurb", which can be dozens of miles from the city on which it depends. In places such as California, exurban life is the only affordable option for most young couples and recent migrants.

These communities are rarely gated but often walled, creating a vague illusion of security and ensuring that the residents have to drive to a shop, even if there happens to be one 50 yards away. Naturally, they have to drive everywhere else. In August it was

announced that the number of cars in the US (1.9 per household) now actually exceeded the number of drivers (1.75).

In many places - especially those growing the fastest - developers have to deal only with the little councils in the towns they are taking over. There are often minimal requirements to provide any kind of infrastructure, such as sewage or schools, to service these new communities. The rules for building houses in the computer game Sim City are stricter than those that apply in most areas of the Sun Belt. Too late, some parts of the country have concluded that this is untenable. The buzz-phrase is "smart growth", which means no more than the kind of forethought before building that has been routine in Europe for half a century. Even the Environmental Protection Agency is not above being helpful: its policies for making use of brownfield sites have seen people moving, improbably, back into the centre of cities such as Pittsburgh.

But where it matters, no one is talking strategy. "In the really fast-growing states, the pace of development is such that they can build huge numbers of houses without anyone considering what it means for the infrastructure," says Marya Morris of the American Planning Association. In California, more than perhaps any other state, there is a debate. But while people talk, developers act: a city catering for up to 70,000 people will soon arise at the foot of the Tehachapi Mountains. According to the Los Angeles Times, it would effectively close the gap between Los Angeles and Bakersfield, theoretically 111 miles away. "Southern California is coming over the hill," said one resident.

Americans still have a presumption of infinite space. But I have made a curious and mildly embarrassing discovery. In states such as Maryland and Ohio, the pattern of settlement in supposedly rural areas is such that it can actually be quite difficult to find a discreet spot away from housing to stop the car and have a pee. Amid the wide-open spaces of Texas, it can be worse: the gap between Dallas and Waco is a 100-mile strip mall. The concepts of townscape and landscape seem non-existent: there is land that has been developed and land that hasn't - yet.

And yet. Time and again, around the US, one is struck by the stunning beauty of the landscape, not in the obvious places, but in corners that few Americans will have heard of: amazing rivers such as the Pearl in Louisiana, or the Choptank in Maryland or the Lost River in West Virginia; the Chocolate Mountains and the San Diego back country in California; the bits that are left of the Outer Banks...

And equally one is struck by the sheer horrendousness of what man has done in the century or so since he seriously got to work over here. In the context of ages, the white man is merely a hotel guest in this continent: he has smashed the furniture and smeared excrement on the walls. He appears to be looking forward to his next night's stay with relish.

Of course, there are still huge tracts of untouched and largely unpopulated land: in the Great Plains, where people are leaving, in the mountains, deserts and Arctic tundra. But last spring, in another of Washington's Friday night announcements, the Department of the Interior announced - no, whispered - that it was removing more than 200m acres

that it owned from "further wilderness study", enabling those areas to be opened for mining, drilling, logging or road-building. That's an area three times the size of Britain. The New York Times did write a trenchant editorial; otherwise the response was minimal.

Not long ago I went for a walk in the Vallecito Mountains in California. After a while, I got myself into a position where the contours of the land blotted out everything and, after the noise of a plane had died away, there was no sight or sound at all that was not produced by nature. This lasted about a minute. Then, from somewhere, a motorcycle roared into earshot.

Sure, there are still places in this vast country where it is possible to escape, but they get harder and harder to find except for the fit, the adventurous and those unencumbered by children or jobs. Most Americans don't live that way. And nowhere now is entirely safe from being ravaged, sometimes in ways that prejudice the future of the whole planet. Al-Qaida and the Iraqi bombers have no need to bother. America is destroying itself.