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(Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter)125 pp. per issue, 7X10
Founded: 1983
ISSN 0740-2775
E-ISSN 1936-0924
2008 ISI Impact Factor: 0.186**Inside the Journal**

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WORLD POLICY JOURNAL

published by
WORLD POLICY INSTITUTE

Summer 2009, Vol. 26, No. 2, Pages 25-32
 Posted Online July 8, 2009.
 (doi:10.1162/wopj.2009.26.2.25)
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Facing Down Armageddon: Our Environment at a Crossroads**Maurice Strong**

Maurice Strong served as secretary-general of the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, which launched the world environmental movement, and the 1992 Earth Summit. He was the first executive director of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). He currently spends much time in Beijing where he is actively involved in environmental and related issues, notably climate change.

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Facing Down Armageddon Our Environment at a Crossroads

Maurice Strong

BEIJING—The modern era has seen the creation of enormous wealth and the broad advance of human development. Put simply, the majority of the world's people are now enjoying unprecedented levels of prosperity and opportunity. But the unexpected speed and severity of the global financial crisis and collapse of some of the most powerful financial institutions have also precipitated a steep decline of the world economy—making this one of the worst of times. It has shaken the foundations of our civilization, the wealthiest ever, and given the lie to its promise of even greater wealth ahead.

Still, the accelerating damage to the Earth's natural capital will have even more devastating consequences for the human future than the current financial and economic crises. The economic and human costs of climate change to the global economy already amount to an estimated \$125 billion per year and the loss of 300,000 lives, according to a recent study by the Global Humanitarian Forum headed by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. And, as noted in a recent report by the World Resources Institute, we face the increased extinction of species, the waning of fish stocks, the ominous decline in the quality and availability of water for human consumption, the continued

degradation of forests and biological resources, the loss of productive soil, worsening air pollution, and a severely contaminated food chain—all threatening the very nature and sustainability of life on Earth. Together, they represent the single greatest threat to human security. Some, however, still contend we can only deal with the risks of climate change and repair damage from environmental degradation after we fix the global economy. This is the height of folly. Waiting would only intensify the imminent threats to our civilization.

Climate change is rooted in the same basic condition that has produced the global financial and economic crises—the unsustainable nature of our existing economic system. The rapid and unexpected meltdown across the planet demonstrates dramatically the vulnerability of a system that cannot continue on the pathway that led to its collapse. This dictates that we must manage these crises of multiple origins on a systemic, integrated basis, rather than as separate and often competing issues. Only thus can we transform crisis into opportunity, and rebuild our civilization in a manner that will ensure the survival and sustainability of life on our planet. The United Nations has played a leading role in the development of awareness of

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