

# THE DENIAL JUSTIFICATION

WHY WE PUT THE ENVIRONMENTAL  
TIME BOMB ON THE BACK BURNER

by Sharon Tregaskis

with Jason Hollander / GAL '07 / and Nicole Pezold / GSAS '04

IMAGINE A MAMMOTH METEOR blazing toward Earth. When it will arrive and whether it will hit directly is debatable, but scientists are unanimous on one thing—it's coming. And they're trying desperately to motivate everyone to take action before it's too late.

While this scenario is science fiction, a similar danger—just as daunting and apocalyptic—is on the horizon. Researchers now almost universally believe that catastrophic climate change, caused primarily by carbon dioxide emissions, is more a matter of “when,” rather than “if.” NASA climate scientist James Hansen predicts that we have perhaps a decade to halt our runaway greenhouse gases, otherwise we will guarantee for our children a fundamentally different planet—one where sea ice no longer blankets the Arctic, where storms relentlessly buffet coastal communities, and conflicts over scarce fresh water and shifting climactic zones rock international relations. And yet global carbon emissions are rising at unprecedented rates, and **Americans are expected to produce ever-greater volumes of carbon dioxide in coming years.**

Our inaction, in part, boils down to how we think. As with the meteor hurtling in our direction from millions of miles away, the science for measuring climate change and its future

effects is complicated, and so far most evidence comes from distant, barely habited places. We, and our leaders, are easily distracted by closer issues—war, terrorism, disease, race relations, economic distress. “People get motivated with near-term dangers, but this is different,” says Tyler Volk (GSAS '82, '84), a biologist and core faculty member in NYU's new environmental studies program. “It's not like the Hudson River is suddenly full of mercury and everyone is threatened.”

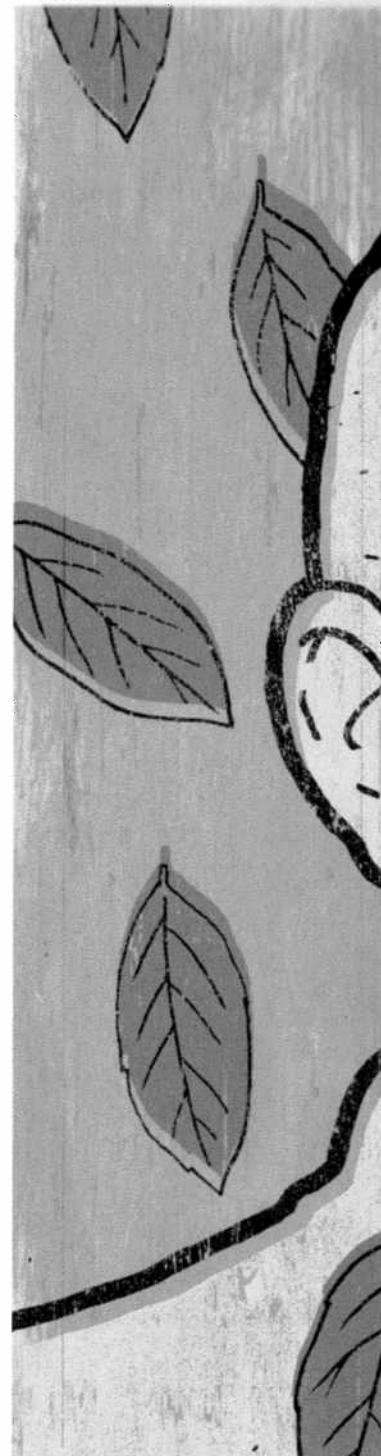
As individuals, we may not deny the mounting evidence of global climate change, but we do harbor an inherent desire to keep our minds on other things. In his 1974 Pulitzer prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*, social scientist Ernest Becker argued that “the essence of normality is the refusal of reality,” echoing Freud who believed repression to be our natural self-protection. In order to tolerate all sorts of inequities, we will often support or rationalize the status quo even when it contradicts our own self-interest, says

NYU social psychologist John Jost, who calls this phenomenon “system justification theory.”

Last spring, Jost collaborated with graduate student Irina Feygina (GSAS '10) and Mount Sinai Hospital psychologist Rachel Goldsmith to investigate how system justification theory interacts with environmental attitudes. Among their findings: Most people who believe that society is generally fair are also skeptical about the forecasted climate crisis. “There are psychological obstacles to creating real, lasting change,” Jost says, “in addition to all of the scientific, technical, economic, and political obstacles.” Because of this, he notes, denial is far easier and more convenient than supporting a carbon tax, paying more for high-efficiency technology, or giving up cheap goods shipped through elaborate, fuel-guzzling supply chains.

Even so, denial is getting harder, as scientists gain an increasingly nuanced understanding of the mechanics—and the consequences—of climate change. In February, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued its most strongly worded report yet on the extent to which humans have already altered the climate and how this will change

our future. “There's no question sea levels will rise,” says David Holland, a mathematician and director of the Center for Atmosphere Ocean Science in the Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences. “What's not clear is how long it will take.” Holland has dedicated his career to understanding the implications of changing weather patterns, traveling to Greenland to study the deterioration of ice



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ILLUSTRATION BY DAN PAGE

sheets, and is especially concerned with the vulnerable coastlines on every continent that will eventually be submerged. “We’re going to have to move cities,” he says. “If it’s going to flood in 1,000 years, we can take a breather. If it’s within 100 years, that’s a problem.”

As scientists like Holland puncture many of our excuses for doing nothing, the status quo itself is shifting. More than

ever, information on the science—and prospective horrors—abounds. Pop culture has gone green, from Al Gore’s Oscar-winning 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* to the Weather Channel’s regular program *Forecast Earth*. Every major magazine—*Time*, *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone* to name a few—has produced a “green” issue, and even *Sports Illustrated* reported on how cli-

mate change will affect the average sports fan.

This public conversation is slowly trickling up to policy makers. In April, a cadre of retired U.S. generals and admirals offered the chilling statement that climate change was “a threat multiplier” for global security and the fight against terrorism, as it will further destabilize desperate regions in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Even George W. Bush, who rejected the Kyoto climate accord in 2001, for the first time acknowledged global climate change in last winter’s State of the Union address. “The problem is, among other things, ideological,” Jost says, “and it needs to be addressed at that level, as well as at other, more technological levels.”

Within the United States, a schism has grown between communities that favor ambitious carbon reduction strategies and those in which change seems remote. More than 400 cities and several states, including New York, California, and Massachusetts, have decided that they can’t wait for the federal government to craft effective policies, and have themselves initiated efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and hold the Environmental Protection Agency to more vigorous

enforcement. (See “The Green Apple,” page 44.)

But without federal support, it’s an uphill battle, says Richard B. Stewart, director of NYU’s Center on Environmental & Land Use Law. “[Current U.S. law] is totally inadequate,” says the professor, who from 1989–91 headed the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill prosecution as assistant attorney general in charge of the Environment and Natural Resources Division of the U.S. Department of Justice. “There are no statutes that specifically address the causes or consequences of climate change.”

Statutes may not exist yet, but the momentum seems to be growing, says philosopher and director of environmental studies Dale Jamieson, who sees a parallel between the climate campaign and the Civil Rights Movement or widespread efforts to enact smoking bans, where over time, a moral and personal imperative emerged. “There’s no way of addressing this unless people come to see it as an ethical issue that changes what they see as right and wrong, how they live, and what kind of world they’re going to leave to their children,” says Jamieson, adding, “The question [remains] whether we’re going to act, and whether it will be meaningful.”