

Science matters

Q: Some of the most dire impacts of climate change, including sea level rise, are several decades away, and even the loss of summer sea ice in the Arctic is years away. How should we factor these threats into our decision making today? Should we be seriously worried about them, or not?

Worrying today about the effects from climate change that are still far off is not only sound; it's the heart of this issue. The fact that the debate is focused largely on serious effects that are still decades away is testimony to the success of climate scientists and their popularizers, led by Al Gore, in explaining how climate change really works. The notion that such far-off events can be safely ignored, at least for a while, is an illusion, or at least very naïve, since they're linked so closely and inextricably to everyone's current behavior. Only by recognizing that serious environmental and ecological changes are virtually inevitable given that behavior - potentially catastrophic ones -- can we create the motivation and incentives to change our behavior. And the long time-frame creates the real possibility that by doing so, we can successfully avoid catastrophes a few decades down the line.

We all should care about such far-off developments for precisely the same reasons that parents worry when children take up cigarette smoking. We may not know when that child will develop serious heart or lung problems or even be 100 percent certain that it will happen. But we know the science well enough to reasonably expect that unless that child's behavior changes - and there's still time to do so -- he or she will pay a price too large for any parent to accept.

By Robert J. Shapiro | January 5, 2010; 1:48 PM ET