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THAT'S LIFE  
Tree Shrugger  
by Michelle Cottle  
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I'm seriously starting to worry about the emotional health of the president. Having jogged into the Oval Office a relatively upbeat, optimistic guy, George W. Bush seems to be swiftly degenerating into a throw-up-your-hands-and-wait-for-disaster fatalist. First, he dispatched a parade of administration folk last month to inform America that bigger, badder terrorist attacks are an inevitable part of our future. (The secretary of defense said it's simply "facing facts" to assume terrorists will get their mitts on nukes or chemical weapons.) Now, the White House has sent the United Nations a "climate action report" concluding that human activity is indeed the primary culprit behind global warming--something the administration has been loathe to admit before--but that, well, there's really nothing we can do about it, so why bother tinkering with environmental policy anyway?

Now, I've never considered myself much of a tree hugger. Sure, I want clean air and water as much as the next gal, but there's something about the often hysterical, apocalyptic tone of the environmental movement that grates. So I can sympathize with Bush's reluctance to take marching orders from the greenies. And I can certainly understand why, having finally acknowledged the link between humans and global warming, Bush finds a fatalistic pose so attractive. To admit that global warming is real, that humans cause it, and that we can do something about it would represent a complete rejection of his past pronouncements--not to mention make Bush unpopular with all those nice men in the energy business who have so generously funded his political career.

Even so, you'd expect a take-charge kind of guy like W. to come up with something better than what he's advocated in the past--basically, just hoping that U.S. industry will adopt voluntary measures to reduce the growth rate of greenhouse gas emissions (not to be confused with a goal of actually reducing emissions). Granted, Bush hates the Kyoto Protocol and fears that serious carbon dioxide restrictions would cripple our economy. Fine. Forget Kyoto. But there are other important, less economically

intrusive steps that could be taken to address this problem, as Gregg Easterbrook so reasonably detailed in TNR last summer. (See "Climate Change, July 23, 2001.) It would be nice if Bush seemed remotely interested in exploring any of those alternatives.

Instead, the new climate report focuses on how we should all be thinking of ways to make the best of the coming shifts in weather patterns, ecosystems, sea levels, etc. Initially, I was hoping this meant I could buy cheap acreage in eastern Georgia and sit around until rising sea levels transformed it into top-dollar beachfront property. But that could take centuries. A surer bet seems to be investment in pesticide companies, since one of the most anticipated results of global warming is the northward march of "vector-borne" diseases such as malaria and dengue fever. Opportunistic, sure. But this mosquito issue is very personal for me: If there is a blood-sucker within ten miles of where I stand, the little bastard will assault me. So if I'm looking at spending the next 50 years stinking of Deep Woods Off to avoid some tropical ailment, I should at least make a few bucks.

The report notes that additional environmental changes are expected to include more frequent drought in the West, increased storm surges along the Southeast coast, a drop in the level of the Great Lakes, and the disappearance of certain fragile ecosystems, such as coastal marshes and Rocky Mountain meadows. But the administration assures us that not all of the news is bad. According to The New York Times, the report "emphasizes that global warming carries potential benefits for the nation, including increased agricultural and forest growth from longer growing seasons, and from more rainfall and carbon dioxide for photosynthesis." At present, it's not entirely clear what benefits "increased growing seasons" really yield (other than Congress having to approve even bigger farm subsidies to pay agribusiness not to plant even more crops). But learning how best to go with the flow will apparently be the Bushies' environmental focus in the coming years.

This, of course, assumes that the president doesn't become so drearily fatalistic that he decides to just pack up and head home to Texas early. Asked about the climate report Tuesday, Bush dismissively noted, "I read the report put out by the bureaucracy." Some saw the remark as his attempt to back away from the report. I fear it's a sign of deepening despair: the president is beginning to regard even parts of his own team as the dreaded, ineffective "bureaucracy." Next thing you know, he'll start encouraging Vice President Cheney to stop exercising and take up smoking again. After all, the guy has already had three heart attacks and a couple of major operations. What good will it do him to start being healthy now? Too much damage has already been done. Go on and have another order of cheese fries, Dick--why fight the inevitable?

MICHELLE COTTLE is a senior editor at TNR.