

We put it there, so let's go first in cleaning up

IN AUSTRALIA, we know that water for irrigation is limited, and we are beginning to discuss how best to divide it up. Here's one way of doing it: let those with the biggest pumps take as much as they want, never mind what that leaves for others.

Not fair, you say? You're right. But then, why are we doing exactly this method of dividing up a scarce resource right now — not with water, but with the atmosphere? Perhaps because we're not used to thinking of the atmosphere as a scarce resource, we don't see how unfairly we are behaving.

The atmosphere is a scarce resource because we are already exceeding its capacity to absorb our greenhouse gases without disastrous climate change. The industrialised nations were the first to pump potentially climate-altering quantities of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, and they have kept on doing it. Neither increasing scientific confidence, nor their own pledges at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro to stabilise greenhouse gases "at a low enough level to prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system" have stopped them.

If the rule of law had the same clout internationally as it has within national borders, we would already be feeling the cost of breaking that promise. Tuvalu, our tiny Pacific island neighbour, has threatened to sue Australia and the United States because, according to some scientific estimates, most of the low-lying coral atolls will disappear under the waves over the next 50 years.

OK, we could treat the cost of compensating Tuvalu's 10,000 residents as a reasonable price to pay for our economic prosperity, but there are tens of millions of people living on similarly low-lying delta regions in Bangladesh, who would have equally good claims, and hundreds of millions of small farmers the world over affected by changing rainfall patterns. Whatever an international court may decide, however, it's hard to imagine the US paying trillions of billions of dollars to people who have been made



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It's time to apply ethics and fairness in the climate change crisis.

worse off by climate change.

What about self-interest as a motive for cutting emissions? That might work for Australia, which is drying out because of climate change, but it won't work for Canada, or Russia, which could benefit from warmer weather. So, like it or not, for the foreseeable future, ethics — and how the citizens of the industrialised nations see it — is crucial to averting disaster.

At the moment, the centre of the ethical debate over climate change is whether the industrialised nations should cut their greenhouse gas emissions in the absence of any binding commitment from the big developing nations, such as China and India. In the long run everyone agrees that unless these emerging economic giants stop increasing their emissions, cuts by the industrialised

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nations will postpone, but not avert, catastrophe. But who should make the first, and deepest, cuts? On at least three plausible principles of justice, the industrialised nations should.

First, "You broke it, you fix it" isn't a bad rule for teaching kids responsibility. Why shouldn't it hold for nations as well? There's no doubt that the industrialised nations have caused the problem because most of the greenhouse gases they have put into the atmosphere over the past century or more are still there, and still contributing to climate change.

So they are the ones that need to fix it, or at least make a start on fixing it.

Second, since the atmosphere is a common resource, everyone is entitled to an equal share of it. But on a per capita basis, we are using more than five times our share, whereas the Chinese are using roughly their share, and the Indians much less than their share. So we — and citizens of other industrialised nations — are the ones who are grossly in excess, and need to cut back first.

Third, those with the most should do the most. It is less of a sacrifice for Australians to do without some of our greenhouse gas-emitting extravagances — like driving big cars or eating so much meat — than it would be for the Chinese or Indians to slow the growth that is moving them to a more modest sufficiency.

If these three principles all point in the direction of nations such as Australia taking the first step, it is hard to think of any plausible principle of justice that points in the opposite direction. The fairness of giving every person on earth an equal share of the atmosphere's capacity to absorb our greenhouse gas emissions is difficult to deny. Why should anyone have a greater entitlement than others to use the earth's atmosphere?

But, in addition to being fair, this scheme, coupled with tradeable emissions quotas, has practical benefits. It would give developing nations a strong incentive to accept mandatory quotas, because if they can keep their per capita emissions low, they will have excess emissions rights to sell to the industrialised nations. Rich countries will benefit, too, because they will be able to choose their preferred mix of reducing emissions and buying up emissions rights from developing nations. It's the best hope we have of solving an otherwise intractable problem.

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