

A Livable Shade of Green

By [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF](#)

Published: July 3, 2005

PORTLAND, Ore.

When President Bush travels to the Group of 8 summit meeting this week, he'll stiff Tony Blair and other leaders who are appealing for firm action on global warming.

"Kyoto would have wrecked our economy," Mr. Bush told a Danish interviewer recently, referring to the accord to curb carbon emissions. Maybe that was a plausible argument a few years ago, but now the city of Portland is proving it flat wrong.

Newly released data show that Portland, America's environmental laboratory, has achieved stunning reductions in carbon emissions. It has reduced emissions below the levels of 1990, the benchmark for the Kyoto accord, while booming economically.

What's more, officials in Portland insist that the campaign to cut carbon emissions has entailed no significant economic price, and on the contrary has brought the city huge benefits: less tax money spent on energy, more convenient transportation, a greener city, and expertise in energy efficiency that is helping local businesses win contracts worldwide.

"People have looked at it the wrong way, as a drain," said Mayor Tom Potter, who himself drives a Prius hybrid. "Actually it's something that attracts people. ... It's economical; it makes sense in dollars."

I've been torn about what to do about global warming. But the evidence is growing that climate change is a real threat: I was bowled over when I visited the Arctic and talked to Eskimos who described sea ice disappearing, permafrost melting and visits by robins, for which they have no word in the local language.

In the past, economic models tended to discourage aggressive action on greenhouse gases, because they indicated that the cost of curbing carbon emissions could be extraordinarily high, amounting to perhaps 3 percent of G.N.P.

That's where Portland's experience is so crucial. It confirms the suggestions of some economists that we can take initial steps against global warming without economic disruptions. Then in a decade or two, we can decide whether to proceed with other, costlier steps.

In 1993, Portland became the first local government in the United States to adopt a strategy to deal with climate change. The latest data, released a few weeks ago, show the results: Greenhouse gas emissions last year in Multnomah County, which includes Portland, dropped below the level of 1990, and per capita emissions were down 13 percent.

This was achieved partly by a major increase in public transit, including two light rail lines and a streetcar system. The city has also built 750 miles of bicycle paths, and the number of people commuting by foot or on bicycle has increased 10 percent.

Portland offers all city employees either a \$25-per-month bus pass or car pool parking. Private businesses are told that if they provide employees with subsidized parking, they should also subsidize bus commutes.

The city has also offered financial incentives and technical assistance to anyone constructing a "green building" with built-in energy efficiency.

Then there are innumerable little steps, such as encouraging people to weatherize their homes. Portland also replaced the bulbs in the city's traffic lights with light-emitting diodes, which reduce electricity use by 80 percent and save the city almost \$500,000 a year.

"Portland's efforts refute the thesis that you can't make progress without huge economic harm," says Erik Sten, a city commissioner. "It actually goes all the other way - to the extent Portland has been successful, the things that we were doing that happened to reduce emissions were the things that made our city livable and hence desirable."

Mr. Sten added that Portland's officials were able to curb carbon emissions only because the steps they took were intrinsically popular and cheap, serving other purposes like reducing traffic congestion or saving on electrical costs. "I haven't seen that much willingness even among our environmentalists," he said, "to do huge masochistic things to save the planet."

So as he heads to the summit meeting, Mr. Bush should get a briefing on Portland's experience (a full report is at www.sustainableportland.org) and accept that we don't need to surrender to global warming.

Perhaps eventually we will face hard trade-offs. But for now Portland shows that we can help our planet without "wrecking" our economy - indeed, at no significant cost at all. At the Group of 8, that should be a no-brainer.

E-mail: nicholas@nytimes.com