6-1-2008

Action on the homefront: A practical guide to climate change

Leigh Gauthier Savage

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol51/iss1/8

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines. For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.
Teachers are often unaware of the impact they have on students — or the resulting impact their students have on the state, the nation and the world.


The book altered Hagan’s world view and ignited his passion for environmental issues. The most recent result, *A South Carolina Guide to Climate Change*, could help shape the state’s future.

Hagan’s guide, the first of its kind in the region, takes an in-depth look at how climate change will affect the state’s plants, animals and people. The guide offers tips for reducing greenhouse gases and other practical ideas that people in South Carolina can add to their daily routines.

Hagan (above), a 2007 Furman graduate, spent the last year traveling the state and compiling research thanks to a Compton Mentor Fellowship. The Compton Foundation award, worth $35,000, allows recent college graduates to work with a mentor on yearlong projects related to the environment.

While many Compton Fellows choose assignments that send them to far-flung locales, Hagan’s idea was to bring global warming closer to home. “I didn’t see a lot of action taking place on energy and climate change issues in South Carolina,” he says. “In talking to people, I began to get the sense that they thought it was far away, it couldn’t impact us, and we couldn’t do much about it. I wanted to describe what could happen here — that global warming isn’t just about polar bears.”

Since he embarked on his journey, he has been pleased, he says, to witness something of a turning point, with more groups and individuals in the state taking interest in the issue. “A lot of people recognize that South Carolina has a lot to lose,” Hagan says.

Through his research, he found that the average temperature in the state is expected to rise as much as five degrees within the next 100 years. Such a seemingly small number could have devastating ramifications for the state’s climate when coupled with increased precipitation and sporadic drought conditions.

Hagan’s guide, which is available on-line (www.scclimatchange.org) and in a printed version, describes how small changes in wildlife habitats could affect the state’s entire population. Fishing enthusiasts may be concerned about the loss of the Southern Brook Trout due to warming waters, and hikers may worry about forests threatened by growing populations of pine beetles, but Hagan says health and economic issues should concern every citizen — even those who are skeptical about global warming or feel people aren’t the cause.

“Tourism is South Carolina’s No. 1 industry,” he says, pointing out that it brings in millions of dollars annually and employs 200,000 people. Thus the need to protect natural areas that attract visitors looking for hiking, camping, fishing or golf.

Public health concerns include the potential for more heat-related injuries, smog-induced asthma and favorable conditions for tropical diseases.

A large part of Hagan’s mission has been to find practical ways South Carolinians can make a difference. He suggests such simple approaches as washing clothes in cold water, using the air-dry setting on the dishwasher, keeping window blinds closed during the summer, and weatherizing homes to prevent leaks. “What’s good for the climate is good for your checkbook,” he says.

Although some might say a few shuttered blinds and weather strips won’t make a dent in the problem, Hagan says his experience at Furman showed him otherwise. He helped start a residence hall energy contest in which students competed to see who could reduce their energy usage the most. In less than one year, 11 buildings saved 150,000 kilowatt hours of electricity. “It goes to show that small actions taken by a large number of people can add up,” he says.

Hagan, who grew up in Tyler, Texas, discovered Furman on-line and decided to attend after visiting the school and sitting in on a class, where he was impressed by the intimate atmosphere and interactive approach. At Furman he found like-minded students, joining organizations such as the Environmental Action Group, the Year of the Environment Committee and the Southern Energy Network.

After majoring in political science and English, he planned to attend law school until he received the Compton Fellowship. He may still pursue a law degree at some point, but his global warming project has fanned the flames of his interest in environmental activism.

“The experience I’ve gained over the course of the last year has really convinced me that my time would be more valuable working in this field,” he says. “Given the severity of the situation we are in now, we have only 10 or so years to make a dramatic shift. I might be of better service if I keep on working.”

— LEIGH GAUTHIER SAVAGE

The author, a 1994 Furman graduate, is a freelance writer from Simpsonville, S.C.