

Article for Brandon Sun "Small World" Column, Sunday, April 8/07

Joe Six-Pack's Introduction to Climate Change

By Zack Gross

The March 8th edition of Sports Illustrated, a magazine better known for macho men and swimsuit women, has Florida Marlins baseball player Dontrelle Willis on its cover, standing up to his thighs in a water-filled stadium.

A caption reads "Sports & Global Warming: As the Planet Changes, So Do the Games We Play – Time to Pay Attention!" This courageous and far-sighted move by SI does more to raise awareness and the temperature of debate about climate change than any environmental magazine could ever hope to do.

Simultaneous to the launch of this edition, SI.com asks its readers if they know why their sports events are constantly being rained out, why the wharf where they used to fish is now under water, and why they don't have the opportunity to ski as much as they used to. While many American leaders who worship professional sports and this particular magazine that has always chronicled it don't believe in global warming, SI.com says "Global warming is here – temperatures are increasing, oceans are warming, fields are drying up, snow is melting, and sea levels are rising." Given deforestation in the world today, says SI, even the traditional wooden baseball bat's existence is in jeopardy!

Sports Illustrated also focuses, in this issue, on steps that the sports world is taking to reduce the environmental damage it might cause. For instance, NASCAR and Formula One, America's racing establishment, have switched to unleaded fuels. New stadiums are putting in filtration and reuse systems to conserve water. The National Football League planted 3,000 trees in Florida as a response to the carbon dioxide emissions generated by last year's Superbowl. Many golf courses are cutting down on the amount of water and chemical sprays they use. Numerous sports stars are becoming celebrity advocates of wildlife and habitat conservation, community pollution prevention such as recycling, and so on.

Of course, some of this is hype – "greenwash," it's called nowadays – similar to large corporations saying that they have gone green or treat their workers better than they used to do. But, some media critics see the coverage given global warming by Sports Illustrated, Atlantic Monthly, Elle, Outside and a diverse selection of other magazines as a sign that this is an issue whose time in the mainstream has come.

The Academy Award won by former US Vice-President Al Gore for his movie/lecture on climate change "An Inconvenient Truth" has helped to raise the level of awareness and credibility of this issue. Now "Joe Six-Pack", the guy who just wants to read about pro sports and look at swimsuit-clad models, will have to cope with something a little more serious.

Outside magazine, an adventure sports and lifestyle publication, recently featured actor turned California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has championed global warming and car emissions regulations in his state, on its cover.

Elle, a fashion magazine, now has an annual “Green Edition” and touts environmentally friendly lifestyle choices as part of living fashionably and healthfully, and entertaining successfully! Numerous scientific and political publications also focus on climate change on today’s newsstands, but a sports magazine taking the plunge is extraordinary – and not necessarily appreciated by all.

The Business & Media Institute sprang into action the day after SI’s Global Warming hit the stands. It began by saying that SI doesn’t have the expertise to jump from beachwear to beach warnings and likely only did so at the behest of its ideological parent company Time Warner/CNN.

BMI called SI “left wing” and guilty of promoting “eco-dogma.” The diatribe ended with the assertion that Sports Illustrated was just filling in time between the end of football season and the beginning of baseball, and that future “serious” editions might speak out on dangerous asteroids, avian flu and nuclear winter.

Not to be outdone, the National Ledger, waiting until March 20th, ran an article called Global Warming Hysteria. In it, the Ledger cites positive comments in SI about Chinese environmental initiatives as simply SI buttering up the “communists” to get better access during next year’s Olympics in Beijing. The offending SI columnist and his sources are called incompetent basketball writers, radical environmentalists, and Al Gore supporters. While there is no question that Sports Illustrated makes some naïve statements (China and India, along with the US, are the world’s major environmental offenders), they still deliver a message that needs to be heard.

The planet is also warmed by comments on SI.com and other web sites as “ordinary” folks weigh in on the March 8th edition. For every congratulatory comment, there is at least one from someone saying that if he wanted to read something serious, he wouldn’t be buying Sports Illustrated, so let’s get back to the usual stuff, please. But SI is hardly left-wing. Much of what it writes is considered common knowledge in Europe and Canada, and amongst more liberal Americans. Ultimately, SI is as entrepreneurial and as individualistic as one would expect. In one article, it talks about business opportunities that come of our current ecological crisis – get rich going green, it says.

We should celebrate any move made by the US mass media to tackle current issues. Rather than criticize them for not going far enough, let’s encourage them to make social and environmental issues a regular feature, rather than something special to run during a quiet news week or as a once a year feature. And, please print it on recycled paper!

Zack Gross is program coordinator at the Manitoba Council for International Co-operation (MCIC), a coalition of 36 international development agencies active in our province.