Top 10 environmental moments of the decade

By Constance Cheng, CNN
December 28, 2009 -- Updated 0035 GMT (0835 HKT)

Top 10 green moments of the decade

(CNN) -- What a difference a decade makes. The "Noughties" saw environmental issues come to the forefront with a marked shift toward all things green in politics, technology and perhaps most importantly, society.

An understanding of climate change was no longer limited to a small group of scientists or environmentalists, and concern started to change the way more us live our lives. Eco Solutions looks back at 10 environmental developments that defined this as the most green decade yet.

Do you agree with our list? What do you think the most significant environmental moments of the decade were? Have you say in the "Sound off" box at the bottom of this page.

The game-changer: The Toyota Prius

In 2001, the Toyota Prius became the first mass-produced hybrid vehicle to be sold worldwide. It heralded the beginning of an era - commercially-viable and even successful green goods. Industry insiders called it a game-changer attracting buyers despite its higher-than-average cost and unique look. Buying a Prius wasn't simply about fuel efficiency, it was making a statement about the environment. To date, more than one million Priuses have been sold worldwide, and other major manufacturers have followed suit to develop their own hybrid and electric-only vehicles.

The summit: COP15

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Video: The decade's greenest moments

December's U.N. summit on climate change held in Copenhagen, Denmark garnered unprecedented attention from around the world. Intended to find a successor to the Kyoto Protocol, the fifteenth Conference of Parties (COP15) was meant to produce a definitive agreement for future emission cuts. Yet even before the summit began, leaders tried to temper expectations by saying that firm targets were "highly unlikely." In then end the accord that was reached fell short of the expectation of

nearly every interested party gathered in the Danish capital. U.N. secretary-general Ban Ki-moon put a brave face on the conference saying leaders were "united in purpose, but were not yet united in action." Read more

Al Gore's star power: "An Inconvenient Truth" and the Nobel Peace Prize

It might not be an exercise in cinematic artistry but Al Gore's 2006 "An Inconvenient Truth" has its place in history. The film was instrumental in spreading the message of climate change and had the rare opportunity of having a wide-spread release (it was one of the highest grossing documentaries of all time).

The 100-minute documentary was based on a simple premise of a Powerpoint presentation, but it was the content not the form that caught the world's attention. Since it's release, it has been maligned by some critics for "fear-mongering." The most contentious assertion in the film described a six meter sea level rise as a realistic short term prospect - a projection that disagrees with U.N. findings.

Yet despite its doomsday scenarios, it explained the basics of climate change to an audience that till then had no access to. The film brought Al Gore an unexpected accolade in 2007, the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Former U.S. Vice President was applauded by the Nobel Committee for "efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change."

The Rise of CFLs

Compact Fluorescent Lightbulbs (CFLs) brought environmentalism into the home. Despite some initial objections to cost and its less than ideal performance (an initial flicker and the inability to use it with a dimmer), producers overcame those hurdles and in 2007, sales of CFLs reached record heights worldwide. Australia has already implemented a ban of traditional incandescent light bulbs while the European Union and Canada are also phasing out the old bulbs.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the average CFL uses 75 percent less energy than the traditional incandescent light bulb. This translates into a $30 saving which would pay for itself in 6 months. It was an important coup for the environmental movement, but green groups now say much more needs to be done to establish recycling programs to deal with CFLs so they don't end up in landfills.

Heating up: A decade of extreme weather

Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a string of deadly hurricanes devastating Haiti in 2008 and the heat wave in Europe in 2003, just some examples that this decade was plagued by wild weather.

While scientists say it is not possible to make a direct link between extreme weather and man-made climate change, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency say "climate change may increase the probability of some ordinary weather events reaching extreme levels or of some extreme events becoming more extreme." Recently, the U.N.'s weather agency said that this decade was the hottest on record.

Noughtie talk : "Carbon Footprint"

This decade saw a flurry of green jargon enter our everyday vocabulary. Growing awareness for the environment meant that noughties vocabulary included words like "carbon footprint," "carbon neutral" and "greenwashing." Perhaps the most significant step was when they were accepted into the

Oxford English Dictionary in 2007. Carbon footprint was defined as "the amount of carbon dioxide emitted due to the activities, especially the consumption of fossil fuels, of a particular person, group, etc."

The devil is in the details: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report

In 2007, climate scientists from around the world met in Paris to lay out what we knew about climate change. It was a significant attempt to amalgamate decades of climate data from around the world. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued the first scientific consensus on climate change, which included an unprecedented acknowledgement that it was "very likely" that climate change was caused by human activity. The report went on to project a temperature rise of 1.8 to 4 degrees Celsius and a sea-level rise of between 28 to 43 cm by the end of the century.

Ten years of growth: Renewable Energy

Most scientists agree that there is no silver bullet for climate change but some believe that a healthy mix of existing technologies especially in the renewable energy sector will be enough to significantly cut emissions. Wind, solar, hydro all saw significant support in the past ten years.

In 2008, global power capacity from renewables topped 280,000 MW, according to the International Energy Agency. That is three times more than what nuclear power plants in the United States currently produce. There are also new players in the sector: India and China are now among the leaders in the installation and manufacture of renewable energy. In 2008, China's wind power capacity doubled for the fourth year running. The technology itself has also developed significantly - solar technology had a few key breakthroughs including improved energy yields (it now tops 20 percent) and the creation of ultra-thin solar panels.

It's going to cost you: The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change

Can you put a price on climate change? Yes, according to British economist Sir Nicholas Stern. In 2006, the former vice president of the World Bank issued a 700-page report calculating the cost of climate change to the world's economy. Green groups called the report a wake-up call for governments who saw a concrete financial impact of climate change for the first time.

The report estimated that climate change would cost at least 5 percent of global GDP annually, now and forever. The worst case scenario would be 20 percent a year ($7 trillion). The Stern Review was the first of many reports that tried to put climate change under an economic perspective. The UN Framework Convention for Climate Change suggests that climate change could cost between $70 to $100 billion by 2030, that's the cost of 3 Beijing Olympics.

Cap and trade

Carbon trading, also known as "cap and trade," became a hotly debated policy that many hope will help counter climate change. Using free-market principals and government regulation, participants in cap and trade schemes buy and sell permits to emit carbon dioxide. Governments limit the amount of emissions allowed and slap heavy fines on those who exceed those limits. Reducing the amount of permits issued over time should then reduce pollution levels.

The EU has the largest emissions trading market, set up in 2005 and more than 30 countries have adopted, or plan to adopt similar models. But there are many critics who point to the lack of a global market for carbon trade, which would make it more effective.

There are also questions over regulation and accounting for pollution offsets. Many see "offsetting" in cap and trade schemes as an escape hatch for businesses to avoid making real reductions in their polluting activities. It's a complex and controversial issue but one that looks set to a key feature of mainstream climate change solutions in years to come.