

Reduce the carbon footprint, save the ocean

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Beaufort County has a good chance to be ground zero in the global warming debate, and it played prominently in at least two discussions this week.

Al Gore wasn't promoting his Academy Award-winning movie "An Inconvenient Truth," but several Southerners have been promoting a healthier South.

Dan Kipnis has been a boat captain, a fisherman and a fishing tournament organizer. He also is an ardent fisheries conservationist who traveled across South Carolina last week to promote a change that could help save the ocean and Beaufort County.

Andy Brack and two S.C. lawmakers have traveled to 11 cities in as many states promoting "Getting Greener: Progressive environmental ideas for the American South," a book by L. Edward Moore that outlines 15 policy recommendations for Southern leaders. The book offers a dozen ways consumers can get greener today without any action by governments; Kipnis offers others.

Brack is chairman and president of the Center for a Better South, a think tank dedicated to developing ideas, policies and information for people who want to make a difference in the South. He also edits and publishes the S.C. Statehouse Report, a legislative forecast and syndicated newspaper column.

From a cell phone on a runway in Montgomery, Ala., on Thursday, Brack said that the book is an important guide for Southerners because their "lawmakers have been timid about taking action to protect the environment. If they don't take action, those special places we have in the South will disappear."

"Over the next generations, millions of Americans will continue to move into the Sunbelt. The South will face new challenges of development and infrastructure pitted against traditional uses of land and Southerners' heritage with fields, mountains, rivers, streams, marshes and forests," Brack says in the book's introduction.

While Moore wrote most of the book, Brack wrote the chapter on Better Land Protection, and points to Beaufort County and Cobb County, Ga., as areas where people want to preserve what they have. In the November 2006 elections, 75 percent of Beaufort voters OK'd \$50 million for land preservation, and 72 percent of Cobb voters approved a \$40 million bond referendum. But states need to do more, he said. Beaufort's 2006 fund equaled the state's expenditure on land preservation between 1998 and 2005.

Kipnis, the fisheries conservationist, takes his message to hunters, anglers, homeowners and anyone else who will listen.

Beaufort County will feel the effects of global warming before many other places, Kipnis said, because of the 9-foot tides in the Port Royal Sound, which are the highest around. The Port Royal Sound system is the "only one of its kind," according to Bob Bender, curator at the Lowcountry Estuarium. Some of the best crabbing and fishing in the country can be found in these waters.

"If all the ice that is on dry land in Iceland falls into the ocean, you'll see a huge rise in the ocean level, and Beaufort County will see it faster than others," Kipnis said.

The rise in sea level could happen faster than anyone thought, he said. A Scientific American article points out that the big melt could take place within decades. This is a looming disaster, Kipnis says, and "We aren't taking it seriously."

He is optimistic that change will occur, but we are going to have to change our way of doing things to make it happen. "Change is coming one way or another," he said.

"What makes me an authority? Nothing. I'm a boat captain, and I am certainly not getting rich traveling around making speeches," he said. But he is interested in preserving the oceans.

Southerners, especially South Carolinians, should listen. In "Getting Greener," the Palmetto State is ranked as a nation -- as are all the states -- and it is not a good place to be. South Carolina ranks 65th on the list of carbon dioxide producers in the world. China is No. 1, California 10, North Carolina 37 and Virginia 43.

Kipnis thinks Americans should be doing their part through solar energy, buying carbon credits, which are a worldwide commodity on the Internet now, and contributing to "green" power-generating facilities to offset fuel use, investing in alternate-fuel technology. "It could be done for \$1 trillion or about the cost of the Iraq war," he said during an interview Tuesday.

Moore and his fellow authors recommend 15 ideas in "Getting Greener." No. 1 is: Each Southern state should designate a leadership body on global warming to develop a statewide global warming emission reduction plan, which also is a suggestion from Kipnis.

Fortunately, Gov. Mark Sanford named a climate change commission in January, the second state in the South to do so. North Carolina was first. A report from the 31-member commission is due in June 2008.

As we await the report, Kipnis thinks that if we all did just one thing to lessen our carbon footprint, we could make a big difference. With 2,876 miles of tidal shoreline, we have a lot to lose.