



Climate Change : Top Climate Stories

Earth Hour: The Greatest Show on the Planet

It never felt so good to be left in the dark: At 8:30pm on March 28, more than 1000 cities in over 80 countries will turn out the lights to protest against climate change. Earth Hour Executive Director Andy Ridley of WWF discusses the greatest community event ever.



Andy Ridley, Earth Hour Executive Director, WWF

"Most people want to deal with climate change, but unless everyone crosses the line together it is going to be really hard." (Photo: Reuters)

What is the purpose of Earth Hour? How did it begin?

Earth Hour started in Sydney in 2007. We were trying to engage a broader Australian audience with the issue of climate change but not through the traditional form of a protest but in a way that communicated the sense of a shared problem that needs a shared response.

We always had an eye on the Copenhagen negotiations at the end of 2009. We felt that without some way for people to engage with the climate change issue nobody would care about what happened in the negotiations.

We hoped a few thousand people in Sydney would take part: At least 2 million did. Last year, 35 countries and 370 towns and cities joined in, 50 to 150 million people. This year, over 80 countries are participating and at least 1066 cities and towns.

How does a city or town become a participant?

We try to leave it up to the cities and towns to make it happen, although we have our criteria: Local government has to support Earth Hour and you have to have an iconic building involved; for example, the Paris local government and the Eiffel Tower. Of the G20 countries we have got 17 or 18 on board, we are still working on Riyadh and Tokyo.

It is all about engaging local companies and local people at city government level. That said, it is a voluntary action. It is not something you need permission to do.

How does the grid cope with sudden falls and surges in

electricity demand?

That presumes that everyone is doing everything at the same time. In fact, because we are talking about thousands of independent actions the power does not go off in one go and does not come back on in one surge.

In Sydney 2007, instead of the city suddenly going dark the lights went down gradually. All the big advertising billboards went off, including the big Allianz one, and then the Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge and so on.

A lot of people used the event as a celebration. In Sydney, thousands were picnicking by the harbor. It is an hour, but we hope people spend a longer time together as a community.



Earth Hour Gallery (click on the image to start)

See pictures from Earth Hour around the globe (Photo: Reuters)

What difference has it made? How much has Earth Hour saved in carbon emissions?

We had some data from the first year. Energy consumption went down about 10.2 percent in the Central Business District (CBD) of Sydney, obviously saving emissions. It is very difficult to monitor and we are not focusing on that. For individuals and companies, however, it is quite easy to assess.

Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) Australia was the first company in the world to back Earth Hour and they saw it as an opportunity to help change staff behavior and company policy. PWC retrofitted their building in Sydney with movement sensor lighting the same year as the first Earth Hour, and now they have set firm targets for reducing their emissions.

Can Earth Hour really change behavior or does it only allow people to feel good for a while before they go back to business as usual?

There is no doubt that Earth Hour is about symbolism. After all, it is only one hour in the year. We know that is not going to save the planet. But look at the campaign for women's suffrage. Symbols were important.

If people in Brazil see people in the U.S. or China doing the same thing they can all act together. Most people want to deal with climate change, but unless everyone crosses the line together it is going to be really hard.

In Australia in 2007, many people were either skeptical about climate change or thought the issue was so big that they couldn't do anything

about it. Even if they did, people would lose jobs and the world would be a harder place. That perception is changing.

Therefore Earth Hour 2009 is a “vote for Earth”, introducing political symbolism?

There are two main messages: the first is that you can do it; the second is that you need to give leaders the mandate to do it. Back in 2007 the Australian government was not engaged with climate change. Now it is.

Earth Hour is about creating a global mandate for political leaders and companies to pursue progressive ways of doing business and start dealing with climate change in this most important of years.

The other part of it is accountability: whether you are Allianz or Andy Ridley the way you approach your life and business—use lights less, turn off the standby on TVs and computers, recycle more often—makes a difference, although we are not saying: “go and live in a cave and eat cold beans”.

In many developing countries people struggle to keep the lights on; haven't there been objections to the symbolism of turning out the lights?

That is a good question and something we thought about hard in our second year: How dare anyone say ‘turn off the lights’ when nations are trying to provide power and bring millions out of poverty?

Remember it is not called a “lights out” campaign. It is called Earth Hour. This is not someone at the center organizing cities around the world, it is cities coming together and deciding to act.

What has amazed us is that within a number of countries where you do have the potential for that backlash scenario—places like China, India, Fiji, Kenya, and Zambia—there are people who want to be involved.

What would be a successful Earth Hour 2009?

A successful Earth Hour would be a successful Copenhagen conference and a successful Copenhagen is the right type of agreement where all countries are aligned together.

Different countries will have different targets, but we all have to step over the line together to make it happen.

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Remember the John F. Kennedy speech: Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. Earth Hour is

**just an idea. It is up to companies and individuals to make changes
and make it happen.**

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