

This is the fourth in a series of short homilies about climate change.

In terms of climate change, the contribution of any one automobile, light bulb, or felled tree is microscopic. Put enough of these together and you can change the temperature of the world for centuries to come. It's hard to believe - and that inability to understand the dramatic cumulative effect of micro-causes probably is one of the reason some people just can't absorb the idea of climate change. Addressing climate change can also involve a multitude of actions, each having a tiny effect, like ensuring that car tires are fully inflated.

But of course, this truth isn't limited to climate change. Other environmental problems are similar: we destroy a rain forest one tree at a time; we wipe out a species with a series of small habitat incursions; we pollute a great river with the seemingly harmless runoff of a thousand fields. Or, to take a non-environmental example, a few unexpected house foreclosures can cascade through the financial system, bringing the economy to its knees.

It's natural to think that something big and dramatic must have big and dramatic causes. But it's often not true.