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Clean air shouldn't be considered a luxury

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It's hard to argue with clean air. Having it is taken for granted, but not having it is a travesty.

"It's difficult to breathe the air in Beijing," said former U.S. Sen. Howard H. Baker Jr., who recently returned from a tour of duty as U.S. ambassador to Japan.

U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander sets out some statistics that should command the attention of residents as well as politicians:

* The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the country's most polluted national park.

* Knoxville is at the top of asthma lists.

* Three-fourths of Tennesseans live in counties in which the air violates federal standards.

Baker made his comments recently in Knoxville during a clean air conference at the University of Tennessee. Alexander made his comments the same day in Washington, D.C., where a Senate committee failed to pass any improvements to federal clean air laws.

A week later, the Bush administration ordered power plants to cut mercury pollution from smokestacks by nearly half within 15 years but left an out for the worst polluters.

The Environmental Protection Agency said the cuts will help protect pregnant women, women of childbearing age and young children from a toxic metal that causes nerve damage. Critics said the arrangements fall far short of what's needed.

In East Tennessee, officials are working to lower the speed limit on interstates to 55 mph for tractor-trailers in Knox, Anderson, Blount, Loudon, Sevier, Jefferson and Cocke counties. The speed limit for passenger vehicles is to be reduced from 70 mph to 65 mph. It's one of the measures aimed at reducing the nitrogen oxide emission factor.

We are pleased to see efforts toward making the environment safer for the Homo sapiens species. The forum that featured native son Al Gore as well as Baker is a positive sign that people are paying attention.

But we need more, and the Smokies park is an example of why.

Although air quality in the park has been gradually improving since the late 1990s, it still doesn't meet federal guidelines. There's a complication, too, in that the rugged terrain in the park is especially conducive to trapping ground-level ozone. Sensitive mountain streams and high-elevation spruce-fir forests are particularly vulnerable to the acid deposition and nitrogen overload.

Over the last 10 years, the park has averaged 30 days a year in which ozone levels exceeded federal health guidelines. The levels appear to be improving, though, as the park had only three days in 2004 when it exceeded ozone guidelines. That's the fewest on record since the 1980s.

Human health is clearly the most significant factor in the need for air quality. We don't want visitors to East Tennessee to one day **go** home saying, "It's difficult to breathe the air in the Smokies."

But we also must remember the Smokies park is the most visited park in the nation, and the scenery is at the top of the list of what visitors come to see.

"The No. 1 recreational activity in the park is viewing scenery, yet our views are impacted 90 percent of the time by haze," said Park Superintendent Dale Ditmanson, speaking at the clean air conference.

Pollution created by humans -- mostly sulfates produced by coal-burning power plants -- has reduced annual visibility in the park to about 25 **miles**. Visibility in the park should be 77 **miles** in some areas. On some days, that visibility is reduced to one **mile** because of the haze.

It's a sad thing to see an area of refuge revered by East Tennesseans -- as well as the visitors from around the world -- suffer from poor air quality.

But watching an asthmatic child suffer from that poor air quality is worse. And that's why it's imperative that we do more than talk about it.

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