



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE - WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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The Earth Summit in Rio has come and gone. The Conference brought together the largest gathering of world leaders in history - 114 in all. This is notable in that it demonstrates that the politicians are beginning to recognize the environment as a grassroots political issue.

The overall objective was to begin the process of negotiating international agreements aimed at forging an environmentally sustainable global economy. Much of the rhetoric and sentiment was commendable. Some significant understandings were embraced. Most important it was a beginning. The beginning of a process that must be conscientiously pursued. It will take several years of enlightened, vigorous, courageous political leadership supported by an informed and committed public to set the world on a course that will carry us to the goal of a sustainable economy. Absent either political leadership or informed public consent the whole enterprise will founder.

As a general proposition, the public is ahead of the political leaders respecting the immediacy of their concern about this issue. In my view this is so because the people live closer to the problem than the politicians and, more importantly, because the politicians most immediate concern is the next election not the current condition of the environment.

The most important thing that Rio told us is that, finally, there is a general recognition that human activity is dangerously compromising the world resource base - that we are piece meal dismantling the ecosystems that sustains all creatures.

Scientists and thoughtful opinion leaders from all walks of life understand this very well and a broad spectrum of the public instinctively senses that something serious is happening to the natural world. The question is, do the world leaders who went to Rio understand the urgency of the issue? Is the issue high on their domestic political agendas? The answer to those two questions is this: We don't know and doubtful. President Bush's

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comments before and at the Rio conference didn't evidence any serious understanding or urgency about the issue. Prime Minister Harlem Brundtland of Norway is the only head of state in the Western industrial world who has for many years warned the world and regularly spelled out the disastrous consequences of continued environmental deterioration. Prior to Rio, at least, the rest have shown little understanding or concern. One must hope that will now change.

My remarks are confined mainly to the political and educational aspects of the issue, because it is in the arena of politics and education where we will succeed or fail to meet the environmental challenge so critical to our future. These remarks are also confined to those environmental issues primarily within our control and within our own borders. While we have a responsibility to provide vigorous international leadership, there are important unfinished environmental challenges here at home that we must address independent of whatever agreements the international community may reach sometime in the future. The successful forging of an environmentally sustainable economy within our borders depends more upon what we do than what the international community does, important as that may be.

✧ The first and most important political and economic reality to recognize is that all industrial nations are rapidly degrading and dissipating their life sustaining resource base. In short, we are all consuming our capital assets...our wealth - and counting it on the profit side of the ledger. The basic wealth of a nation is its air, water, soil, forests, minerals, rivers, lakes, oceans, scenic beauty and wildlife habitats. Take it away and all that's left is a desert.

Perhaps the most sacred tenet of capitalism is that you do not consume capital to pay for current expenses. Yet, unwittingly or perhaps witlessly, the captains of industry and the free market entrepreneurs have been depleting the nation's capital resource base for so long they are unaware that they are sowing the seeds that will destroy the system.

Every business enterprise in history that consumed its capital and called it profit went bankrupt. Sovereign nations are no different -- It will just take them longer to get there.

In the past century the industrial world has destroyed or degraded a great portion of the capital accumulation on earth by air, river, lake and ocean pollution, soil erosion, depletion of aquifers, overdrafting ocean resources, deforestation and destruction of wildlife habitats and scenic beauty.

If we are going to stop dissipating this resource base, which certainly we must, then three important things must happen during the next 30-40 years -- beginning soon.

Those three things involve, first, bringing together a unified political coalition behind an environmental program to create a sustainable economy; next, we must implement a long term nationwide environmental education effort aimed at nurturing a conservation

generation; and, finally, we must insist upon vigorous, imaginative Presidential leadership. Indeed, Presidential leadership is not merely important -- it is crucial. It is the key to the whole enterprise. The President must be the catalyst that serves to coalesce the nation behind a positive program of action. No one else can do it.

Now for a few moments let's examine the three important things that must happen if we are going to stop dissipating our life sustaining resource base.

✱ First - We must begin a carefully designed long term economic-environmental program with the objective of creating an environmentally sustainable economy. That is to say, an economy that is not fueled by consuming our capital -- one that is sustained by living off the interest, so to speak.

Everything that needs to be done to create a sustainable economy is well within our capacity. The only question is whether we have the vision to recognize the necessity of acting soon and the national will and political leadership to implement such a long range program.

✱ Second - We must nurture a "conservation generation" imbued in its heart and mind with a strong conservation ethic that serves to guide its conduct respecting all matters relating to nature and its works. That is to say, an ethic that guides its daily personal conduct and its conduct as leaders and decision makers in both the private and public sectors. The market place plus laws, rules, regulations, and the courts can only do part of the job. The rest is up to "we, the people".

The distinguished English Jurist, Lord Moulton, went to the heart of the matter when he said, "The measure of civilization is the degree of its' obedience to the unenforceable." That is a profound observation. It addresses the nature and character of our culture. It concerns ethics and mores. It concerns standards of behavior and social conduct. Quite simply, it concerns the morally binding customs of a society.

A deeply ingrained conservation ethic will produce a high degree of obedience to the unenforceable because it is self enforcing. It can do what laws, rules, courts and policemen cannot.

Absent a conservation ethic deeply ingrained in our culture we will continue in the future, as we have in the past, to destroy enduring national values in exchange for a handful of silver and a mortgage on the future.

When experts are asked to list the most serious environmental problems they are practically unanimous in ranking at the top of the list the calamitous consequences of continued exponential population growth -- Even by the most optimistic scenarios world population will increase by 95 million every year during this decade adding a net of one billion to the 1990 population of 5.3 billion. Does anyone really believe this will be a better

world with a billion more people in the year 2000 and better still when world population doubles in a few more decades, that the United States will be a better country with 100 million more people, or that New York, Miami, Chicago, Detroit and Los Angeles are better cities now than when they were half the size and will be better still when half again as large. The answer to these questions is obvious. Indeed the population of the United States already exceeds its carrying capacity -- that is to say our current population is being sustained by continued erosion of our resource base. This is not a sustainable situation over the long term.

The concept of exponential population growth comes home to me in a rather dramatic way when I contemplate that the population of the world was only 1.7 billion in 1916, the year I was born. It was 3.7 billion when I organized Earth Day in 1970; 5.3 billion in 1990; and will be about 6.3 billion in the year 2000. Since 1916 U.S. population has rapidly expanded from under 100 million to 252 million in 1991 and still growing.

Ironically, a year ago, Congress and the President dramatically increased immigration quotas without bothering even to pay lip service to the most important underlying question of all -- That is the vital question of population growth and the limits of the carrying capacity of our resource base. During the 15 months the new immigration bill was pending in the Congress (July 1989 - October 1990) thousands of words of debate were printed in the Congressional Record. Yet in scanning that record, I found only one brief reference to carrying capacity. It was by Senator Alan Simpson in the Congressional Record July 11, 1989. He commented that the bill would increase legal immigration by 22 percent even though every poll of the American people indicates they want to "admit the current level or even less...." He went on to observe that setting immigration levels:

"...is a very tough job. No one wants to address it. It is filled with emotion, fear, guilt and racism and traditions of the Statue of Liberty and traditions of our classic immigration heritage... I think a national level of immigration is very important for us to predict...our future demographic profile, our future population size...our environmental needs...what is the ideal population of the United States? It was interesting in our work on the select Commission that we had difficulty in funding studies on what the population of the United States might or should be with regard to the carrying capacity of this remarkable land. No one chose to address that...."

From conversations with friends in the Congress and the press, it is my view that the failure to address this issue is primarily due to a failure to appreciate the iron rule of carrying capacity or to understand the disastrous implications of exponential population growth. The consistent automatic response to any expressed doubts about the wisdom of expanding immigration quotas is, "we're a nation of immigrants" - whatever that has to do with it. As Professor Garrett Hardin once observed, "every country is a nation of immigrants." Vast wide-open spaces in the West is another justification - but those areas are already at their limit or beyond carrying capacity. The President, the Congress, and the

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press would not intentionally compound our massive ecological deficit and, at the same time, reduce the standard of living for future generations, but that is the inevitable consequence of our continued population growth, exacerbated by excessive immigration.

It is my hope that next year some members of Congress can be persuaded to undertake comprehensive hearings on carrying capacity. I am preparing a proposal to do just that. Understanding the problem is the first step to resolving it. Any serious consideration of the population issue would compel the conclusion that we should be moving vigorously to stabilize our population, not increase it, and ultimately to match it to our carrying capacity. Any other course leads inexorably to a lower standard of living and a lower quality environment. We have already moved a long way down that path. At some stage, that downward trend becomes irreversible. Public debate on this issue is a priority of the first rank.

In 1940, when world population was only 2.3 billion and U.S. population 132 million, Aldo Leopold had the wisdom to recognize the folly of pursuing a course of unlimited population growth. He attacked, as he put it, "the current philosophy which assures that because a small increase in density enriched human life, that an indefinite increase will enrich it indefinitely."

When we find educated and distinguished citizens like Professor Julian Simon and Ben Wattenberg arguing that population isn't a problem, that more is better, a closer examination inevitably reveals that they are the traditional mainstream economists. No biologist, ecologist, or resource economist would make that foolish argument.

Unfortunately, a preponderance of main stream economists think the health of the economy and the wealth of the nation are measured by the simplistic exercise of adding up the annual production of goods and services without factoring in the accumulated environmental deficit or the annual cost of environmental deterioration. Whereas the economics profession should be at the cutting edge of the drive to forge a sustainable economy they are instead an intellectual and political impediment to the process.

Thus, except for a relatively small number of economists like John Daly (author of For The Common Good) the profession has made itself irrelevant to the central issue of our time.

The extent of their irrelevancy was aptly put by Amory Lovins when he said, "Economists are those people who lie awake nights worrying about whether what actually works in the real world could conceivably work in theory."

At a recent conference sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency I used this quote. Shortly, a note was sent to the podium signed by a professor saying, "I'm a recovering economist, and I love what you said about the profession."

POPULATION ESTIMATES

Information from Population Reference Bureau - (202) 483-1100

DATE	WORLD	DATE	UNITED STATES
1800	1,000,000,000	1800	5,297,000
1900	1,628,000,000	1900	76,094,000
1920	1,861,000,000	1920	106,461,000
1930	2,070,000,000	1930	123,188,000
1940	2,296,000,000	1940	132,122,000
1950	2,525,000,000	1950	150,697,000
1970	3,696,000,000	1960	179,323,000
1984	4,761,000,000	1970	203,302,000
1990	5,250,000,000	1980	226,546,000
2000	6,250,000,000	1990	248,710,000

After population the experts list such vital matters as the threat of global warming, pollution of the oceans, declining bio-diversity, ground water pollution, hazardous wastes and many more. All of these issues would rank high on any list. Ironically, however, an issue arguably of equal importance to population is rarely noted or mentioned anywhere. Yet it is the key to our environmental future. The absence of a pervasive, guiding conservation ethic in our culture is the issue and the problem. It is a crippling if not, indeed, a fatal weakness. Society's answer must be to focus its attention and energies on nurturing a conservation generation imbued with a conservation ethic. Without such a guiding cultural ethic society will not have the understanding, motivation, conviction or political will to persist in addressing the truly hard questions that will confront us in the decades to come.

Tragically, the universal guiding ethic of the United States and all other industrial nations since the industrial revolution has been maximum exploitation of all resources with minimum or no concern for the environment. This guiding ethic of industrial nations has been quite precisely described by a Japanese journalist who was asked by ecologist Paul Ehrlich why the Japanese whaling industry is busily exterminating the very source of its wealth. The answer: "You are thinking of the whaling industry as an organization interested in maintaining whales. Actually it is better viewed as a huge quantity of capital attempting to earn the highest possible return. If it can exterminate whales in 10 years and make a 15% profit, but it could make 10% with a sustainable harvest, then it will exterminate them in 10 years. After that, the money will be moved to exterminate some other resource."

Economist Herman Daly cogently summarized this evolving tragedy when he said, "There is something fundamentally wrong in treating the earth as if it were a business in liquidation." Nonetheless, that fairly describes our stewardship of the planet.

Alfred Wood Krutch described our guiding ethic with some biting satire: "When someone destroys something replaceable made by mankind, he is called a vandal. When someone destroys something irreplaceable made by God he is called a developer."

Had our society been guided by a conservation ethic we would not have fallen into an endless number of avoidable costly environmental blunders. We would not have polluted ocean estuaries, rivers, lakes and the air. Indeed, guided by a conservation ethic we would not continue to this very day draining valuable wetlands at the rate of 300,000 acres a year. Neither would we continue to waste taxpayer dollars subsidizing timber sales from our national forests at a cost of \$312 million a year, and, in the process, destroy watersheds, fisheries, wildlife habitats and scenic beauty. If we were, in fact, guided by some meaningful ethic we wouldn't continue cutting down the last significant stands of old growth temperate zone rain forests left on the planet -- once gone, its like will never be seen again.

At least we ought to have the good sense to learn from what has happened in the East Bloc nations. In many parts of those countries environmental recovery isn't possible - they have already passed the point of no return.

Fortunately, there are encouraging signs that we as a society are beginning to develop a conservation ethic that will ultimately flower into a powerful social, political and economic force. The sooner the better.

A committed conservation generation is crucial to the political process through which we will do or fail to do what is necessary to forge an environmentally sustainable economy in the next three or four decades.

If we are going to succeed in raising a conservation generation soon enough to have a significant impact in the near term we must initiate a comprehensive nationwide

environmental education program in every school system in American. The Governor of every state should have at the top of his or her agenda a proposal mandating that environmental education be included in the curriculum for every class from kindergarten through high school. The state of Wisconsin has implemented such a program K through 12. If every state would follow Wisconsin's lead we would dramatically speed up the process. Conservation organizations should force this issue into the political dialogue of every campaign in every state.

A well designed environmental education program will produce an informed and committed conservation generation that will provide the critical understanding and support for moving the nation to a sustainable economy. Once we have nurtured a generation that understands the nature and functioning of our life sustaining ecosystems, a generation that appreciates its role and impact on it, from that will evolve a guiding environmental ethic. This ethic will guide leaders in both the private and public sectors in making the hard decisions and it will provide the necessary public support to implement them.

Aldo Leopold put it well when he wrote "A land ethic...reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land." His concept of the land, of course, encompassed the totality of the ecosystem - everything in it and their inter-relatedness.

Unfortunately, neither population nor environmental education were on the agenda at Rio. The institution of an environmental education program in school systems worldwide should have been on the agenda, could have been adopted, and would contribute more to addressing the issue than any of the conventions proposed or signed at Rio. If we are to make real progress over the long pull, this must become a priority issue. Then someday even the editorial writers on the Wall Street Journal will understand the issue.

The Third ingredient necessary to the process of forging a coalition of all leaders and groups behind a long-term program to create a sustainable economy is far-sighted and bold leadership from this and all future Presidents. Without that leadership we will continue to blunder along losing ground year by year.

Every revolution, every major political or social change comes about at some stage when a critical mass of opinion evolves and coalesces around an important issue. In the past decade or so, we have witnessed several interesting examples - all of them in the Communist East Bloc countries. In Poland in 1980, Lech Welesa and his union sparked a revolt against the Communist government. It worked because a critical mass of opinion had coalesced in rejection of the Communist system. Though it was repressed, it gathered the energy to emerge again under Walesa's leadership. A similar event occurred in the Soviet Union when Gorbachev relaxed dictatorial control over speech. We may be witnessing the beginnings of some kind of unorganized rejection of politics as usual in this year's presidential campaign.

This is all by way of saying that, over the past quarter century, public concern for the status of our environment has rapidly escalated and continues to expand every year. In my view, the nation is prepared to rally behind a program designed to begin the process of forging an environmentally sustainable economy.

Only the President has the prestige to step forward and capture the attention of the nation, establish an agenda for action and provide the credibility and urgency necessary to move the nation.

We are dealing with a major social, ecological and economic challenge unlike any other in our history. It is a challenge that begs for the kind of dedicated, inspirational leadership provided by Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill in their pursuit of victory in the Second World War.

Nothing less will set in motion the public and private machinery necessary to stir society to join forces in a coordinated long term effort to build a sustainable economy.

It is vital that the next president come up with a specific plausible agenda that will move the nation toward that goal.

The president who undertakes to lead the nation on this issue should appoint a highly respected commission to evaluate and list the most urgent environmental priorities and justify each with a paragraph explaining why it is in the nation's vital interest to address that issue without delay.

The agenda of priorities should then be presented to the Congress followed up by a nationwide presidential tour requesting public support and explaining that the economy, the quality of life, the future of the nation is at stake. The President should make it unmistakably clear that jobs, a prosperous economy, and a clean environment are not antithetical but a dirty environment is.

There is no doubt in my mind that the nation will rally to support a long-term program to forge a sustainable economy if we can find a president to lead the cause.