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ENVIRONMENT • POPULATION • SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

by

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The Message for Earth Day XXV

Forging and maintaining a sustainable society is The Challenge for this and all generations to come. At this point in history, no nation has managed to evolve into a sustainable society. We are all pursuing a self-destructive course of fueling our economies by drawing down our natural capital—that is to say, by degrading and depleting our resource base—and counting it on the income side of the ledger. This, obviously, is not a sustainable situation over the long term.

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Twenty five years ago that remarkable phenomenon Earth Day burst onto the political scene. In October 1993 American Heritage magazine reflected on that event in these words:

"....on April 22, 1970, Earth Day was held, one of the most remarkable happenings in the history of democracy. Fully 10 percent of the population of the country, twenty million people, demonstrated their support for redeeming the American environment....American politics and public policy would never be the same again."

The idea of Earth Day was a national demonstration of environmental concern big enough to shake up the political establishment—get its attention, get some action, force the environmental issue onto the political agenda of national priorities. That was the goal. Magically it worked, thanks to the spontaneous response of millions of concerned Americans. Suddenly the environment became a national political priority by public demand. That was the vital first step. At last the political establishment woke up and began the process of responding to public concerns about the deteriorating condition of the environment.

Now, after twenty five years of debating, researching, learning, there has evolved a pretty general understanding that the state of the environment is the key factor in determining our way of life and the quality of it.

The history of man has been influenced by many revolutions but none more important than the Agricultural Revolution followed by the Industrial Revolution. We are now at the threshold of a third great revolution, the transition to a sustainable society . . . which is described as "one that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

There is a profound moral question that revolves around the issue of how we treat the life-giving resources of the planet. Do we who are here today owe anything to future generations of people and other living things? If our answer is in the negative, as current and past practices would seem to indicate, then we are squarely on course travelling down the road to massive environmental degradation. If, however, we have a moral obligation to the future then we must move expeditiously to preserve all environmental options for those who will follow.

The problem is this. Until recently, we haven't recognized the existence of any environmental limits or problems that might impose a moral duty on this generation to preserve opportunities and choices for future generations. From the time our ancestors landed on these shores, we have lived by the belief that the gifts of nature were inexhaustible. So, there was no need to worry about the future.

Now that we know there are finite limits to the bounty of the land, we also must know we have a moral obligation to pass that bounty on to future generations. That is what sustainability is all about.

The most encouraging phenomenon evolving in the big and real world of politics and ecology is the growing recognition that forging and maintaining a sustainable society is the challenge and the ultimate goal for this and all generations to come.

At this point in history, no nation has managed, either by design or accident, to evolve into a sustainable society. We are all pursuing a self destructive course of fueling our economies by consuming our capital--that is to say, by degrading and depleting our resource base--and counting it on the income side of the ledger. That, obviously, is not a sustainable situation over the long term.

The bottom line question is obvious and critical. Can we as a nation evolve into a sustainable society during the next four or five decades? That is to say, a sustainable society which we would view with approval. The answer is yes--if we have strong political leadership and the support of a society imbued with a guiding environmental ethic. The evolution of such an ethic within our culture is happening now at an accelerating pace.

Increasingly, we have come to understand that the wealth of the nation is its air, water, soil, forests, minerals, rivers, lakes, oceans, scenic beauty, wildlife habitats and biodiversity. Take this resource base away and all that is left is a wasteland.

The Worldwatch Institute states the same case in another way.

"Three biological systems--croplands, forests, and grasslands-- support the world economy. Except for fossil fuels and

minerals, they supply all the raw materials for industry; except for seafood, they provide all our food.

In short, that's all there is. That's the whole economy. That's where all the economic activity and all the jobs come from. These biological systems contain the sustaining wealth of the world. All around the planet these systems are under varying degrees of stress and degradation in almost all places including the United States. As we continue to degrade them we are consuming our capital. And, in the process, we erode living standards and compromise the quality of our habitat. It is a dangerous and slippery slope.

One of the major political obstacles to environmental progress is the widely held and mistaken belief that protecting the environment threatens jobs. That's why we so frequently hear political and business leaders, economists, and others who should know better, vacuously asserting they "are for the environment if it doesn't cost jobs." That has been a favorite cliché among politicians and leaders of both political parties. It discloses a failure to understand the ironclad connection between the environment and economy. If we are going to manage our economy intelligently it must be understood that jobs are inextricably tied to the environment and totally dependent upon it.

The immediate promise of jobs and the expectation of big profits is almost always an unbeatable combination. All too often it results in the grant of unlimited political license to exploit whatever the resource with no concern for the environmental damage. That damage, of course, is translated into long term erosion of our sustaining economic base. In short, each such event undermines the concept of sustainability and costs jobs in the long run. The tragic irony of it all is that most of this environmental degradation could be avoided under proper management.

I have a friend whose guiding theology for all political matters is the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal. He could never quite understand that there is a direct and beneficial connection between a healthy environment and a prosperous economy until I described the connection in the jargon of his business world. I said to him, "Look at it this way and the connection becomes obvious. It is this--The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment. All economic activity is dependent upon that environment with its underlying resource base. When the environment is finally forced to file under Chapter 11 because its resource base has been polluted, degraded, dissipated, irretrievably compromised, then, the economy goes down into bankruptcy with it because the economy is just a subset within the ecological system."

In a dramatic and sobering joint statement (1992) the United States National Academy of Sciences and the Royal Society of London, two of the world's leading scientific bodies, addressed the state of the planet in the following words:

"If current predictions of population growth prove accurate and patterns of human activity on the planet remain unchanged, science and technology may not be able to prevent either irreversible degradation of the environment or continued poverty for much of the world.

.....

The future of our planet is in the balance. Sustainable development can be achieved, but only if irreversible degradation of the environment can be halted in time. The next 30 years may be crucial."

Given the great prestige and the conservative bent of such scientific bodies their shocking observation with its sweeping social, political, and economic implications cannot be brushed off as radical environmentalism or alarmist nonsense. Astonishingly this remarkable statement received less notice in the press than last night's basketball game.

When experts are asked to list the most critical environmental problems they are practically unanimous in ranking at the top of the list the calamitous consequences of continued exponential population growth.

The concept of exponential population growth comes home to me rather dramatically when I contemplate that the population of the world was only 1.7 billion in 1916, the year I was born, and will be about 6.3 billion in the year 2000. Since 1916 U.S. population has rapidly expanded from 98 million to 260 million and still growing. The numbers boggle the mind--a net increase in world population of 95 million per year--260,000 a day or 10,800 an hour.

Lost in the endless arguments over how many people can be sustained on the planet is another question of far greater import--What is the optimum population of the world or the United States? Have we not already exceeded it? What will the world or the United States look like with twice as many people? Let's take a look close to home. What will be the political, cultural and social consequences of doubling our population? At current growth rates, U.S. population will increase from 260 million to 522 million by 2055--just 60 years from now.

With twice as many people, it will be necessary to double the total U.S. infrastructure in just 60 years.

A Few Examples

1. Twice as many cars, trucks, planes, airports, parking lots, streets and freeways.
2. Twice as many houses and apartment buildings.
3. Twice as many grade schools, high schools, colleges and trade schools.
4. Twice as many hospitals.
5. Twice as many prisons and reform schools.
6. In short, twice as much of everything, including traffic jams and crime on the streets.

What Happens to Wildlife Habitat?

Population growth has already destroyed half the nation's wetlands and a major portion of habitat for birds and other animals. With twice the current population will there be left any wilderness areas, remote and quiet places, habitat for song birds, water fowl and other wild creatures? Certainly not very much.

New Cities, Suburbs, Housing Developments

With double the population it will be necessary to take over and develop in the next 60 years an amount of farm land and scenic countryside equal to the total already developed in the past 200 years.

National Parks, National Forests, Wildlife Refuges, BLM Lands and Wilderness Areas

With twice the population, what will happen to the last of our great natural areas which are already experiencing serious degradation from population pressures? The short answer is, they will be gone--rare and special places like our national parks and national forests will evolve into modified theme parks and Disneylands--The process is already underway.

Will the Quality of Life Be Better With Twice As Many People?

Will mega-cities twice the size of New York, Miami, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles be more manageable, more liveable and safer?

The question is this: Do we have the wit clearly to perceive the long-term implications and ramifications of continued exponential population growth soon enough effectively to address that issue within our own borders? Indications are that, as of now, the answer is no. Recently, Congress dramatically increased immigration quotas and has under consideration proposals to increase tax credits for dependent children. If we are concerned about population this takes us in the wrong direction.

Will Twice As Many People Give Us More Freedom and Security?

Main stream economists have dominated economic thought with comfortable assurances that there is no foreseeable limit to economic expansion; that exponential population growth is an asset not a liability; that the health of the economy and the wealth of the nation are measured by the simplistic exercise of totalling the annual production of goods and services without factoring in the annual cost of environmental deterioration. Thus, the billion dollar clean up cost of the oil spill in Alaska is counted as part of the Gross National Product. I suppose that teaches us that the more oil spills we have the richer we will become.

It is little wonder that the economics profession, except for a small number of resource economists, has made itself irrelevant to the central issue of our time. The extent of their irrelevance 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."

Ironically, an issue at least 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. 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.

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

Once we have nurtured a generation that understands the basic nature and functioning of our life sustaining ecosystem, a generation that recognizes that all creatures including humans are sustained by the same ecosystem, a generation that appreciates its role and impact on that system, from that, of necessity will evolve a guiding environmental ethic--that is the way it works. An ethic evolves when a society reaches a firm consensus that certain conduct enhances the welfare of the group and other conduct endangers it. 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. Without such a guiding ethic, we won't make the hard decisions until necessity overwhelms us, and then it's too late.

The distinguished British jurist, Lord Moulton, neatly summed it all up in one sentence. As he put it: "The measure of a civilization is the degree of its compliance with the unenforceable." In other words, what you do when nobody is looking is what counts. That is what ethics is all about.

We are dealing with a 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. This challenge is far more serious than the military threat to the democratic west in World War II. Nations can recover from lost wars--witness Germany and Japan--but there is no recovery from a destroyed ecosystem.

The opportunity for a gradual but complete break with our destructive environmental history and a new beginning is at hand.

Whatever else the President may do during his time in office, he would rank among our greatest Presidents if he became the President who successfully set the country on a course toward an environmentally sustainable economy. Our three greatest presidents achieved their rank in history because they successfully rose to lead the nation and meet the grave challenges of their time. The historical events confronting Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt were less important than the

environmental challenge is today. That is so because the status of our environment will determine for all time the viability and the quality of life on the planet for all creatures.

On December 5, 1962, Dean Achison, in a speech at West Point, observed that "Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a goal." That describes the current American dilemma. The Soviet superpower has disintegrated, the Communist menace has dissolved and the Cold War is over. Still, the United States has yet to find a unifying theme, a moral cause to replace it. This despite the fact that a monumental moral cause is near at hand and a far more serious challenge than the Cold War ever was. It's the war against the planet. How do we bring it to an end and where do we start? It must start in the United States. We cannot and should not wait for the rest of the world.

Reaching a general understanding that sustainability is the ultimate issue will finally bring us face-to-face with the political challenge of forging a sustainable society during the next few decades. It is a challenge we can meet if we have the leadership and the political will to do so.

The bottom line is this--a sustainable society at some bare subsistence level will ultimately evolve even if we as a society simply do nothing. Unfortunately, at that stage we will end up debating over earth-friendly solutions to scarcity.

All of this will be enormously complicated and controversial far beyond anything ever before attempted. The debate and controversy are vital to the process of developing public understanding and support for making the hard decisions and the right decisions. If we fail to make the necessary decisions, nature will make them for us and all future generations.

In a speech in Philadelphia, June 27, 1936 President Roosevelt said:

"There is a mysterious cycle in human events. To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny."

This eloquent exhortation is a better fit for the generation which is now preparing to assume responsibility for our common future. The challenge of forging a sustainable society during the next few decades will require that we contemplate a bigger rendezvous and a bigger destiny than Roosevelt was thinking about in 1936. We can measure up to the challenge if we have the will to do so--that is the only question. I am optimistic that this generation will have the foresight and the will to begin the task of forging a sustainable society.

POPULATION GROWTH

DATE	WORLD	UNITED STATES
1800	912,000,000	5,297,000
1900	1,628,000,000	76,094,000
1920	1,861,000,000	106,461,000
1930	2,070,000,000	123,188,000
1940	2,296,000,000	132,122,000
1950	2,525,000,000	150,697,000
1960	3,180,974,000	179,323,000
1970	3,696,000,000	203,302,000
1980	4,468,590,000	226,546,000
1990	5,295,000,000	248,710,000

DATE	WORLD	U.S. Middle Projections*	U.S. High Projections*
2000	6,165,079,000	276,241,000	281,957,000
2025	8,362,723,000	338,338,000	386,595,000
2050	10,247,321,000	392,031,000	522,098,000
NOTE: Projected increase between 1990 and 2050		143,321,000	273,388,000

Numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau

YEAR	WORLD	TIME LAPSED
1825	1 BILLION	1 MILLION YEARS
1925	2 BILLION	100 YEARS
1960	3 BILLION	35 YEARS
1975	4 BILLION	15 YEARS
1987	5 BILLION	12 YEARS