

Sustaining the Wild equals Sustaining the World

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THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, GOVERNMENTS AND PRIVATE CITIZENS alike expend a great deal of time and energy exploring and debating weighty issues such as war and peace, nuclear proliferation, the economy, education, poverty, international relations, the preservation of democratic institutions, health care, jobs, and many more, as they should. This is important stuff and it deserves constant attention.

But there is something far more important: the status of the habitat which sustains all plants and animals, including humans. The hard reality is that no war, revolution, or peril in history measures up in importance to the threat of continual, relentless, and pervasive environmental deterioration. The first order of human business must be to reverse that process.

The issue that can no longer be ignored or shunted aside is already visible on the horizon. It is identified under various titles such as "sustainability," "sustainable development," "environmentally sustainable society," "carrying capacity"—all referring to the same basic concept. A society that manages to meet its needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs is described as a sustainable society.

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

It is interesting to note that capitalist and communist countries alike

have quite happily and uncritically shared the same philosophy respecting the utilization of their resources. "Maximum exploitation of all resources with little or no consideration for the environmental consequences" has been the guiding ethic. Immeasurable damage has been done worldwide. It has been worse in those nations behind the Iron Curtain simply because there was no freedom for democratic protest, but the difference is a matter of degree only.

Though some positive change is underway, the degradation of life-sustaining ecosystems continues, ranging from modest to serious to disastrous throughout the industrial and developing world. As a species, human beings must revive in themselves that "intelligent humility toward our place in nature" that Aldo Leopold wrote about sixty years ago, a necessary humility that can best be expressed by how our species perceives and honors the wilderness that sustains us all. It was Leopold who also wrote that wilderness was the anvil on which the artifact called civilization was forged. It is wilderness, with its biological diversity and complex systems of life, that nurtures all human enterprise still.

Worldwide, only 26% of Earth's land mass remains as wilderness, exclusive of Antarctica. Some of that is desert, reflected in the 54% of Botswana that is wilderness, the 42% of Egypt, and the 70% of Mauritania.

Some is icy wilderness near polar regions: 29% of Iceland is wilderness and much of the 64% of Canada that is wilderness is in the far north. The large deserts and the polar regions make up a large chunk of the world's remaining wilderness. Of the rest, a little wilderness is deliberately designated in lands selected for preservation purposes. Five percent of the total land in the United States, for example, is specifically designated as wilderness. The U.S. wilderness system consists of 591 separate areas covering 95 million acres and administered by the four federal land agencies. The rest is wilderness only because it has not yet been obliterated by the onslaught of human population growth and industrial development. Everywhere, the remaining wilderness is disappearing—rainforests are slashed, rivers dammed and polluted, grasslands eaten away, soils depleted, ecosystems that have taken million of years to evolve destroyed in the blink of an eye that is human history.

The question is often asked: Isn't there an inherent conflict between wilderness preservation and meeting the needs of the people? I turn that around and ask: Isn't there an inherent conflict between meeting the needs of the people and destroying the nature we need? Are we so sure we know how to meet the needs of the people that we will destroy, helter-skelter, the eons-old lab in which Nature has evolved its fascinating array of ecosystems, species, and landscapes? Nature tends toward a vast array of species and interactions, with wide variation within species. Human agriculture, on the other hand, for example, has tended toward monoculture, putting humans at increased risk of wide-scale disaster due to disease, infestation, or genetic breakdown in the food production chain. By assuming that open lands and wilderness must necessarily give way to human population growth and consumption

patterns, we will destroy the very school to which we all should be dedicating our considerable intelligence and energy.

This year, representatives of most of the nations of the world will meet in Cairo at the International Conference on Population and Development. The discussion will focus on developing a global plan of action to address population growth, development needs, and the interaction of the two. Throughout the debate will be scattered references to "sustainability." It will be vital that the delegates recognize the no development, no economy, is sustainable unless it is environmentally sensitive and environmentally sound. Development is not sustainable if it destroys the home of the plants and the animals—and the plants and the animals need wilderness to survive.

Therefore, the bottom-line question is obvious and critical. Can we evolve into a sustainable society during the next three or four decades? That is to say, a sustainable society which we would view with approval. The answer is "yes"—*if* certain things happen. In the United States, two of those certain things are these: strong political leadership starting at the presidential level, and the support of an ecologically literate society imbued with a guiding environmental ethic. The evolution of such an ethic within our culture is happening right now at a rapidly accelerating pace.

The president has a key role. He must articulate the issue and outline a long-range program that will begin to lead us toward a sustainable society. An extended national educational dialogue is a necessary precedent to any action and the president must lead and invigorate the dialogue. A general understanding and consensus must evolve—an understanding that the basic wealth of our nation is our life-sustaining resource base. In short, our wealth is the air, water, soil, forests, minerals, rivers,

lakes, oceans, scenic beauty, wildlife habitats, and biodiversity. Take that resource base away and all that is left is a wasteland.

Dr. Lester Brown of The Worldwatch Institute states the same case in another way. As he puts it:

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. Forests are the source of fuel, lumber, paper, and numerous other products. Grasslands provide meat, milk, leather, and wool. Croplands supply food, feed, and an endless array of raw materials for industry such as fiber and vegetable oils.

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 wealth of the world accumulated over the ages. All around the planet these systems are under varying degrees of stress in almost all places, including the United States. The deterioration ranges from mild to disastrous. 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.

As these biological systems deteriorate, the capitalist system deteriorates with them because it is destroying itself by consuming the capital that sustains it. This process can be reversed if the political system and corporate community make a radical course change and embrace the concept of sustainability. If, in fact, the free enterprise system as we know it is to survive, capitalism must become an Earth-friendly enterprise. If it continues down the

path of unrestrained resource depletion, it will simply self-destruct.

There are encouraging signs that many corporate leaders recognize that only an Earth-friendly capitalism can survive and prosper. The more quickly the Congress, the public, and the private sector recognize this simple reality, the more quickly we can begin to address the issue.

In a dramatic and sobering joint statement (made in 1992), the U.S. 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." 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.

Lots of vexing issues will need to be addressed during this long process of forging a sustainable society. For one thing, what kind of sustainable society would we like to design and live in? The concept of sustainability or carrying capacity for the human species is flexible in the sense that it depends in part upon the standard at which we wish to live or would find acceptable. For example, China and the United States are just about the same size—3,600,000 square miles. The United States has a population of 260 million and China 1.1 billion. I would guess the United States could support 1.1 billion people at the Chinese standard of living and their quality of life and with many of their

restraints on mobility and freedom. But who among us would want that?

As part of the necessary national education process in this country, I hope appropriate committees of Congress can be persuaded to undertake a series of hearings on sustainability. What is it? Can we achieve it? How? Can anyone think of anything more important for us as a society to understand than what must be done to achieve a sustainable society? Congressional hearings on sustainability would inform the public, the Congress, and the president. It would give recognition to this vital issue and help force it onto our national political agenda.

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. Even by the most optimistic scenarios, world population will increase from 5.3 billion to 6.3 billion during this decade. 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, or that the United States will be a better country with 150 or 250 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, its current population is being sustained by continued erosion of its resource base. This is not a sustainable situation over the long term. It is the road to bankruptcy. It is irrational to continue to travel that road when forging an alternative is feasible.

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. It was 3.7 billion when I organized Earth Day in 1970, and will be about 6.3 billion in the year 2000. Since 1916 U.S. population has rapidly expanded from under 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.

With a growing population has come a growing pressure on wilderness, with visitation going so high as to necessitate the use of reservation or permit systems in some wilderness areas. Indian Peaks, Colorado, and San Geronio Wilderness Area, California, are two examples, with much of the visitation coming from the nearby population centers of Denver and Los Angeles. In addition, the wilderness character of other federal public lands is under attack. The National Park System had just 358 thousand visitors in 1916, jumping to 33 million in 1950, 172 million in 1970, and over 270 million last year. So many cars now line up to enter Yosemite National Park that the wait just to get in the gate can be several hours long. Great Smoky Mountains National Park, a World Heritage Site, is within driving distance of about 150 million people and experienced a 10% jump in visitors in the 1980s. The parking lots at Yellowstone National Park are full by mid-May, early in the tourist season, and park visitation jumped by nearly 50% during the last decade. Many national forests and wildlife refuges suffer the same sort of visitation pressure.

The rising population also puts pressure on the federal public lands with its rising demand for natural resources. The demand for oil is threatening wilderness areas in Alaska and Montana. Timbering has forever altered the wild character of the national forests in the Rocky Mountains, the Pacific Northwest, and New England, and

threatens the remaining ancient forests. Air pollution from metropolitan and power-producing regions escapes regional boundaries and corrupts the air over such parks as Grand Canyon and Sequoia and wilderness areas scattered from the Appalachians to the Sierras.

After population, the experts list such vital matters as the threat of global warming, pollution of the oceans, declining biodiversity, groundwater pollution, hazardous wastes, and many more. All of these issues would rank high on any list. Ironically, however, 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.

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 economists. No biologist or ecologist would make that argument.

Mainstream 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 resource economists, 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."

Often lost in the economic discussion of development, species preservation, scientific, and agricultural research, is the equally important but unquantifiable aesthetic and spiritual importance of wilderness, parks, forests, coastlines, and other open areas. The technological and economic vistas in our minds should not be allowed to obscure the beautiful vistas of our lands. I cannot imagine a more poverty-stricken world than one in which there are no mountains or forests to gaze across without the eye running into angular concrete and mirror windows; a world in which the rivers are sterile and restricted to straight concrete beds and there are no bubbling brooks or leaping trout and salmon; a world where the beaches are no longer scattered with the detritus of nature—surf-smoothed stones, sea shells, strands of kelp—and are instead covered with the detritus of "civilization": cigarette butts, abandoned plastic toys, beer cans, and wadded paper. For our mental elbow room to be big enough to save our environmental elbow room, a conservation ethic must be widespread.

Is it elitist to want to preserve nature and revive an "intelligent humility toward nature"? I think not. Before being visited by the consumer way of Western life, many local cultures around the world preserved just such an intelligent humility, farming in environmentally sensitive ways, looking to nature for cures to their ailments, and thanking

their gods for the sheer beauty of their surroundings.

Fortunately, there are encouraging signs that human societies in many parts of the world are beginning to recognize their obligation to and dependence upon the whole community of life. The U.S. is beginning to develop a conservation ethic that will ultimately flower into a powerful social, political, and economic force. The sooner this happens, 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. It cannot be said too often—education and more education is the key to it all. We already have extensive experience in environmental education in hundreds of schools across the nation. The state of Wisconsin, for instance, has become the first to mandate environmental education in every school, from kindergarten through 12th grade.

A well-designed environmental education program will produce an informed and committed conservation generation that will provide the moral and political support necessary to move the nation to a sustainable economy. Ecological literacy is the only foundation on which a successful long-term program can be built and sustained. Indeed, ecology is the defining study, the revolutionary science of our time. It is a science that must become a part of the common knowledge of the general public. For the first time in history we have a science that needs to be understood by the man on the street if it is to serve its purpose.

While the science of ecology with its endless ramifications may be the most complicated of all disciplines, the fundamental guiding principles underlying the science of ecology are quite simple and easily understood by children in grade school. *Everything is connected to everything*

else; and all creatures are sustained by the same ecosystem. That is all one has to understand. 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.

We are dealing with a social, ecological, and economic challenge unlike any other in human 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 destroyed ecosystems.

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

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 what Winston Churchill called "the peace of mutual terror," that fear that bound so many nations together in a common cause and shaped our own society for nearly two generations. 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 is 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 must, in fact, be conscious that not only do we need to preserve our own resource base, but we are responsible for the consumption of the resource base of many other

countries—their minerals, water, food production, timber.

The U.S. cannot and should not wait for the rest of the world to develop a consensus on sustainability. That means the process must start with the president. He is the one person who can bring it all together; the one person who can lay out a new environmental course for the nation to pursue over the next thirty or forty years; and, clearly, he is the only one who can command the necessary attention to force the issue of sustainability into the political dialogue of the country and onto the national political agenda.

Whatever else the president may do during his time in office—including balancing the budget, reducing the national debt, and establishing a workable long-term health care plan—these dramatic successes would be little noted in history compared with the mark he would leave if he became the president who successfully set the United States 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 chal-

lenges 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. With U.S. leadership showing the way, other world leaders must increase the call for population stabilization and more sustainable resource use in their own countries.

The bottom line is this—a sustainable existence at some bare subsistence level will ultimately evolve even if human societies 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 and will extend over a period of many years. The debate and controversy are vital to the process of developing public understanding and support for making the hard decisions and the right decisions. And if we humans fail to make such decisions, nature will make them for us and for all future generations.