

PERSPECTIVE: SOME GOOD NEWS ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT
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- Robins will disappear completely, part of a massive biological wipeout. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* 1962.
- Crop failures will result in mass starvation in the United States by the 1980s. Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* 1968.
- Petroleum reserves will be exhausted by the 1990s. *The Limits to Growth*, 1972.
- Thousands of species will become extinct during the 1980s. Norman Myers, *The Sinking Ark*, 1979.
- The worst is already here. Nature has ended. Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, 1989.

These are dire predictions, and the cause for much despair among environmentalists and others. Fortunately, none of them are true. Robins abound, and there was no silent spring. Crop failures in the 1980s were ephemeral. Petroleum reserves are not exhausted, and may well be increasing with the discovery of new oil sources. Thousands of species didn't die in the 1980s. At most, a handful did, and these are even questionable. So what gives?

One answer is that for the first time, people are beginning to learn the contribution human activities make to their environment, and at first these sound frightening.

Consider that U.S. factories, power plants and vehicles dump 19 million tons of sulfur dioxide per year into the atmosphere. Sulfur dioxide is believed to be the chief cause of "acid rain." Nineteen million tons sounds unbelievable and horrifying, until you realize the nature makes this atmospheric contribution piddling in comparison. For example, the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines emitted an estimated 30 million tons of sulfur dioxide in just a few hours. Ongoing natural processes such as ocean chemistry place some 100 million tons of sulfur dioxide in the atmosphere each year.

A second answer is that there is money in bleak predictions. The more acute a problem seems, the more money it will attract, whether from government-sponsored funds or contributions from private sources. It is difficult to raise funds with the observation that human activity may have some influence on acid rain, but much easier to do so with the promise that the forests will be bare in 10 years unless money is forthcoming to prevent it. Who wants to see denuded forests? Dire predictions are quoted in the media because they make arresting headlines. These in turn feed other dire predictions. Good news, particularly good environmental news, rarely makes page one. Thus when the *New York Times* printed a story "Air Found Cleaner in U.S. Cities" in 1992, it ran on page 24.

A third answer is that environmentalists represent the planet as a fixed and finite resource. At first glance this seems to make sense. However, it misses the more subtle point that in fact the planet, as all of nature, is constantly refreshing and recharging itself—cleansing itself, if you will. The apocalyptic view of the world can't take this into account. It's as if people were standing on the beach watching the tide go out, screaming, "The ocean's disappearing, the ocean is disappearing!" But of course, it isn't. It's in flux.

This philosophical mindset is very destructive. It lends a fundamentally negative cast, as bad as the smog it hopes to dispel, over the lives of the people it reaches. It encourages hopelessness—for under-developed people and countries, and for developed countries as well. Hopeless people act very differently than hopeful people. They tend to act destructively, without concern for others. They also tend to act desperately and irrationally. Lack

of hope for the future can even lead to war. So this is serious business.

Buddhism views this fundamental negativity as karmic, and something very much to be combated and defeated. Environmentalism only sees victory in limiting or even eliminating human production, consumption, development and progress. In that sense it is not worrisome, because no one will ultimately buy that. But in the meantime, it wrongly casts a very negative outlook on the real progress human beings have made in modern times. That negative outlook is going to make it difficult for our sons and daughters to think there is a bright future ahead for them—and I believe there is.

In closing, let's look at the keystone of environmental fears—global warming. Man's contribution to global warming is the real environmental challenge we face today, many people believe.

In fact, global warming and the “greenhouse effect” are quite natural. Without them the planet would be some 60 degrees F. colder than it is.

Water vapor accounts for 99 percent of natural global warming. The remaining one percent of the greenhouse effect comes from carbon dioxide and other gases, mostly produced naturally, and not by man. (Decay of vegetable matter, volcanoes and other natural processes add around 200 billion tons of carbon dioxide to the air annually. Human activity through power production, automobile use, and the burning of forests contributes about 7 billion tons.) This means that the natural contribution to greenhouse gases is 99.96 percent, and the human contribution to greenhouse gases is 0.04 percent. The human factor in global warming—if in fact the globe is warming—is tiny.

To quote George H. Taylor, state climatologist for Oregon and president of the American Association of State Climatologists: “It's true that human beings are producing more greenhouse gases now than before, and that greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are at higher levels than they have been for a millennia. But much of the debate over global warming is really beside the point, because the key assumption—that there is a scientific consensus on climate change—is false.

“In fact, many mainstream scientists say there is insufficient knowledge of the magnitude of natural climatic variations, especially solar radiation and ocean currents, to gauge how large the human impact is by comparison.”

Finally, some good news.

Forest growth in the United States now exceeds forest harvesting, and has since the 1940s (*Resources for the Future*, Roger Sedjo). The states of Vermont, Connecticut and Massachusetts were 35 percent wooded 150 years ago. Today they are 59 percent wooded. Comparable figures for New Hampshire are 50 percent then and 86 percent today.

The worst-case estimate for logging harm to U.S. forests in the 1980s is 4–7 million acres “damaged.” There are 728 million forested acres in America. That's 0.961 percent.

The percent of earth occupied by human beings is much exaggerated in the national conscience, where fear of overpopulation—a very real challenge for the future—makes it sound like there will be no more open space in a few years. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the total “built-up” space in the U.S. (cities, towns, roads, suburbs, homes, offices, airports and other man-made impositions on the land) is 2 percent. Europe is 8 percent.

Dire predictions are made on the basis of existing facts. Thus, in the late 19th century, horse proliferation was called an irreversible peril for 20th-century society.

Are there environmental problems today? Of course. What should be done about them? Whatever it is, we should act on facts and not on fears.

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To quote the Heidelberg Appeal issued at the 1992 Earth Summit and signed by 2,600 credentialed scientists, including 72 Nobel winners, Linus Pauling and Elie Wiesel among them:

“We are worried (about) the emergence of an irrational ideology opposed to scientific and industrial progress.... We contend that a Natural State, idealized by movements with a tendency to look toward the past, does not exist and probably has not existed since man’s first appearance in the biosphere.... The greatest evils that stalk our Earth are ignorance and oppression, not technology and industry.”

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