

BIOS AND BUSINESS

[Kitty P. Kyriakopoulos](#)

Chairman of the Board
Bauxites Parnasse Mining Company
Greece

Never before has there been an era like this. An era that will transform our collective life like only two other events in history have: the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Now, however, we are trying to answer an agonizing question: Whether, in this age of global change, stemming from the interdependence between human development and the environment, we shall be able to have economic growth in ecologically sustainable ways. According to one team of experts, aluminum reserves, at 1989 consumption rates, are estimated as having a lifetime of 256 years. At 2030 rates, i.e. with a population of 10 billion consuming at current U.S. rates, the reserves' life-span is estimated at 124 years. Aluminum is the third most abundant element in the Earth's crust, after oxygen and silicon, and if this example, taken from the industry I come from, does not mean a lot to you, just think of petroleum. According to the same source, and with the same rationalisation, petroleum reserves at 2030 rates are enough for just three years!

Although we have witnessed dramatic technological change in the past, and we shall probably witness even more dramatic change in the next forty years, let me put to you the notion that something might go mightily wrong if we don't do something about it and do it real fast. All of us can help to prevent it, each in our smaller or bigger way, by safeguarding this planet for our children, while ensuring a more comfortable life for our contemporaries. In this respect, the world business community has a tremendous responsibility and I, for one, believe it has become truly aware of it. Let me refer to mining which, as I mentioned before, represents a large part of our activities. One does not choose mining locations so that maximum contribution to the economy or optimal employment can be achieved. Mother Nature takes care of mining locations, and in a rather whimsical way. In Greece, bauxite deposits are to be found in mountains and hills, under forests and pasturelands. In some cases, bauxite can be reached by underground mining, which has little adverse impact on the environment. Back in 1963, in an environment-naive era, our company started underground mining, realising that it would eventually have to minimise surface mining. We are currently generating more than 50% of our output that way. But surface mining cannot be totally eliminated for various reasons, which I'll be glad to explain. Its impact on the landscape, at least visually, is dramatic and nothing to be happy about. One must state, in all truth, that only nature itself can heal its wounds completely. But time is of the essence and, therefore, nature must be helped. In the last 15 years, Bauxites Parnasse have excavated 773 hectares and have replanted 132 (17%) of them. (One has, of course, to bear in mind that most of the remaining 541 hectares are still being mined). During the same period, the company has planted 950,000 trees and shrubs and has erected 90 kilometers of fence to protect young plants against animal grazing.

Let me point out that we do not really know much about the protection of the environment: it was only in the 1920s that the Russian mineralogist, Vladimir I. Vernadsky, started writing about the biosphere and we had to wait until the International Geophysical Year of 1957 for the next big step in understanding global environmental change. However, if we now know a few things about protecting the environment, our knowledge and experience in restoring it to its previous state, whenever its alteration cannot be prevented, is virtually non-existent. Before us, no one had tried serious landscape restoration in the rocky hills and mountains of Greece, regions with little water and even less topsoil, where the existence of every single tree is a small feat of nature, making one wonder how it manages to cling to its precarious position between two rocks and survive on a handful of soil.

There are a lot of mining experts, but there is an acute shortage of after-mining experts. We had, therefore, to start from scratch and virtually invent our own know-how. We have made a lot of mistakes, spent a lot of money and had a lot of failures. But we kept trying and, thank God, we have also had quite a few successes. We shall keep trying. I think that the opening statement of President Bush at the "White House Conference on Science and Economics Research Related to Global Change," less than a month ago, puts the whole problem in its correct perspective: " Let me focus for just a moment on the developing world. In a climate of poverty or persistent economic struggle, protecting the environment becomes a far more difficult challenge. Cold statistics don't begin to capture the harsh realities that are at stake. Development doesn't mean just another point in the gross national product, the GNP; it's measured in human lives, an end to hunger, lower infant mortality, longer life expectancy. Not just quality of life, but life itself. Environmental policies that ignore the economic factor, the human factor, are destined to fail. But there's another reason to consider the economic factor when the issue is the environment. There is no better ally in service of our environment than strong economies. Economies that make possible the increased efficiencies that enable us to make environmental gains. Economies that generate the new technologies that help us arrest and reverse the damage that we've done to our environment. We need new economies that allow us to make vital investments in our common future."

Let me conclude by stressing exactly this last point of President Bush: whether we live in Greece, Turkey, India or Canada, what we are really investing in is our common future. Allow me to paraphrase Marcus Aurelius Antonius and say that "My country, as an Athenian, is Greece, but as a human being, it is the Universe."

May Biopolitics be the catalyst that will unite this world.

References

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2. Frosch, R.A., (1989) Scientific American.
3. Reserves = quantities that can be profitably extracted with current technology, while resources = total quantities thought to exist.
4. April 17, 1990, in Washington D.C. Text distributed by USIS Athens, Stories EU2040417 and EU2120417-04/17/90.
5. Roman Emperor (121-180) who wrote his "Meditations" in Greek . Original text (VI,44)

Kitty P. Kyriakopoulos was born in Romania and received her basic education in England and France. She is a graduate of Mount Holyoke College, U.S.A., with a concentration in physics and mathematics and did graduate work at Columbia University. From 1970 to 1980 she was the President and managing director of the Mining Complex Eliopoulou-Kyriakopoulou and has served as chairman of the board since 1986. Married since 1950 to Mr. Paris Kyriakopoulos, President of the Central Union of Hellenic Chambers of Commerce, she has two children, a son and a daughter.