

THERE DOES NOT HAVE TO BE AN "OR" IN THE PHRASE "ENVIRONMENT OR THE ECONOMY"

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Human history 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. Unfortunately like the preceding two revolutions the transition to a sustainable society will not be without pain and it will not happen overnight. In addition this revolution will not be without its detractors who will question its base and deny its goals.

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 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 have not recognised 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. We have lived by the belief that the gifts of nature were inexhaustible. Now that we know there are finite limits to the bounty of the earth, we also must know we have a moral obligation to pass that bounty on to future generations. That is what sustainability is all about.

An encouraging sign evolving in the 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 fuelling our resource base and counting it on the income side of the ledger. That, obviously, is not a sustainable situation over the long term.

One of the major political obstacles to environmental progress and sustainability is the widely held mistaken belief that protecting the environment threatens jobs. That is why we, so frequently, hear political and business leaders, economists, and others who should know better, asserting they are for the environment if it does not cost jobs. That has been a favourite cliché among politicians in many countries.

This belief, however, discloses a failure to understand the fundamental connection between the environment and the economy. If we are going to manage our economy intelligently it must be understood that jobs are fundamentally 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. 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.

Recently I gave a speech in which I described myself as a despairing optimist when it came to the environment. Certainly there is plenty to despair about. We are living on a planet under stress. With a population of five billion we are living in a full occupancy planet and the effects are unfortunately too evident. United Nations data for 1994 indicates that all environmental parameters measured show destabilisation:

- Sea levels are rising world-wide.
- Renewable resources such as water, forests, and soils all show stress.
- World-wide fisheries are threatened with collapse in 14 of the 17 fishing grounds.

With such problems how can one be optimistic? I prefer to look at it another way. The problems have never been greater but the skills and talents to address the problems have also never been greater. The wealth of a nation is its air, water, soils, forests, minerals, rivers, lakes, oceans, scenic beauty, wildlife habitats and biodiversity. Take this resource base away and all that is left is a wasteland.

As a world society I hope that we are beginning to understand that it is not a question of the economy or the environment it is a question of both. 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 and except for seafood they provide all our food."

In short, that is all there is. That is the whole economy. That is 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. 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.

We are on the dawn of a new century. One hundred years ago it would have been inconceivable to envision the changes that would take place as we entered the new century. There is little doubt that what happened 100 years ago will pale in comparison to the changes we will witness in the next decade. Change is also necessary in how we think. As we enter this new century it is critical that we begin to think in entirely new ways about old problems, but, unfortunately this is easier said than done.

The issue of the environment and the economy is one of the areas that requires this new way of thinking. The economy and the environment must not be viewed as opposites. They are not. A new way to view the two would be to describe the economy as a totally owned subsidiary of the environment. In other words, when the one goes bankrupt the other will soon follow.

A second new way of thinking about the environment and the economy is to view a pollutant as a resource out of place. The same properties that make a substance a problem in the environment, such as durability or chemical makeup, could also be seen as positive traits in a product. The example of plastic bottles being turned into carpet or plastic lumber is only one example of this new way of thinking. It is necessary to think of going from a problem to a product to a profit. In this scenario both the environment and the economy are winners.

Another excellent example of this is in tourism. Tourism is the largest business in the world representing 1 in 10 jobs and is expected to increase to 2 in 10 by the turn of the century. Today, tourism is a 3.7 trillion dollar industry. Tourism, and its associated economic spin-off, is directly dependent on a quality environment. Eco-tourism, a term that was not even developed a decade ago has become one of the fastest sectors of growth in the industry.

As we enter the next century, forging new alliances between business and environmental sectors is critical. Call this eco-realism or call it common sense, one thing that is certain is that the polarisation, that separated these two sectors for the century, must end. Collectively we have a lot to learn, unlearn and relearn.

There is a wide area of consensus between those who believe the sky is always falling and those who deny there are any environmental concerns. It is in this wide area of consensus that we must harness our energy and unite community resources toward a sustainable future. We must all work together in order to ensure that we plan our future and not just let it happen. Such planning, understanding and co-operation will ultimately be in the best interest of the economy, the environment and our grandchildren.

Professor **Bradley Smith**, who holds a Ph.D. from the School of Natural Resources and Environment, University of Michigan, is currently Dean of Huxley College of Environmental Science at Western Washington University and Advisor to the President of the United States on environmental issues. From 1991 to 1994 he served as Director, Office of Environmental Education, United States Environmental Protection Agency, in Washington D.C. He has also served as Member of the US Senior Executive Service, Acting President of the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation and US Representative to, and Chairman of, the Trilateral Committee of the Memorandum of Understanding on Environmental Education Among Canada, Mexico and the United States. Internationally, he is continuing advisor to the United Nations Environmental Program, and a member of the International Advisory Council for Education and Communication on Environment and Development, Toronto, Canada, as well as advisor to various important organisations. Professor Smith has authored or co-authored several environmentally related textbooks, including the frequently re-printed "Environmental Science: the Study of Interrelationships." He has been the recipient of numerous environmental awards, including the EPA's own Bronze Medal, in 1993.