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Expanding the Relevancy of the Environmental Movement

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Abstract

Our approach to managing natural resources should be guided by a moral and ethical approach to life as well as by practical and scientific considerations. Examples abound of instances in which Americans have created and willfully ignored environmental externalities. These externalities have had racist consequences through their disproportional impacts on people of color, and they pose serious consequences for future generations.

INTRODUCTION

I am treating this as an Earth Day presentation. Today is the day after Earth Day, and this symposium is the only opportunity I have to share my environmental thoughts. For this Earth Day observation, I would like to remind us all of the only admonition that President Clinton repeated during his State of the Union message. He said twice, "It is time to remember tomorrow."

It has been said that either you know that all life is sacred and intertwined or you don't. Most indicators of the way we manage our natural resources, at least in my opinion, demonstrate that we do not know any such thing. Here we are at an academic institution. Most of us are professional land managers, but I believe that the spiritual, the moral, and the ethical should govern our approach to resource management. Our failure to know culturally, legally, politically, economically, administratively, and professionally that all life is sacred and intertwined is a significant challenge to the way we do business.

Every day, as we engage in our careers and make necessary choices in terms of budget setting, prioritization, strategic planning, permit decisions, regulatory decisions, and enforcement decisions, we should ask ourselves quite explicitly and then answer the following two questions. Neither question is new, but I do not know if we ask these questions of

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ourselves every day. First, is land a commodity, or is it the resource upon which we all depend, physically and spiritually, and upon which the future depends? The second question intrigues me as I talk with ecologists: Is the ecology that I practice a quantitative science built upon chemistry, botany, biology, atmospheric physics, and geology, or is it a moral and ethical approach to life itself? The answer to both of these questions is, of course, "both." Land is both a resource and a commodity; ecology is both a quantitative and analytical approach and a spiritual and moral approach to life.

In these answers lies the tension of the natural resources professions. That tension is demonstrated by the fact that we not too jokingly call many of our colleagues combatologists, particularly the biologists and the geologists and the botanists who had the misfortune to work in the Department of Interior for the Watt and Hodel administrations. The fact that there is even a need for Jeff DeBonis to take his Association of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics (AFSEEE) and expand it to create Public Employees for Ethical Responsibility (PEER) is an abysmal commentary on our profession and on many people's answers to those two questions. These are indicators that many of us would answer both of these questions wrong. Implicitly, of course, not explicitly, instead of both commodity and resource, instead of both science and an ethical approach to life, we would answer commodity, not resource, or we would answer science, not moral and ethical approach to life. This is wrong, but all too American.

This paper was transcribed from an audiotape of the presentation given during the symposium.

Just look at the phrases we in America have coined or crafted around those two wrong answers. One of these phrases you have all heard: "multiple use." Those are code words, of course, for "me first." They are code words for science, not morality and ethics. Another American saying that is designed around the wrong answer is "out of sight, out of mind," representative of the tall smokestack approach. Two other American phrases are "cost-benefit analysis" and "risk assessment." Both are concepts crafted around the wrong answers to the questions which should govern our professional approach to natural resources management.

Many of you may have read, and if you have not you should, a four- or five-part series in the New York Times from April 1993. The New York Times articles called cost-benefit analysis and risk management—in my view two very sad and impoverished approaches of America in the 1950s—the environmentalism of the future. My assessment of those articles is that they were written by scientists in a primal scream of rage who clearly got the answers wrong and did not get the message. Life is so much more America.

Life is also so much more *simple* when we externalize the difficult-to-quantify from our calculus, when we marginalize or mock or ignore the spiritual. I had an opportunity to hear my first Rush Limbaugh radio program recently. A number of us were driving over to watch a colleague run the Boston Marathon when this jerk came on the radio saying something about "you know, Al Gore, that environmental wacko." When I reached over and changed the station, the lady driving the car said that was Rush Limbaugh. There is an example of American marginalization of the spiritual, of a person who could not get the answer right if he tried.

We put our medical waste on Indian reservations. We discount the impact of private actions on the future. We fly our hazardous waste to Third World nations, including several in our own country called Appalachia and Louisiana. It is so damned American, so damned Western, to create externalities and then willfully ignore those externalities. Not to be oblivious to them, but to professionally and willfully ignore them. It is no accident that this thoughtless view of selfish business practices, public and private, is called "cowboy economics." Cowboy economics, as all of you must know, is the economics that dismisses environmental effects as negative externalities. I. as a westerner, have a challenge for those of you in this very respected western audience. Devote yourself, while you are asking those questions, to tracking down the wily externality and do not just stamp it out, but internalize that externality in the calculus of answering those two questions.

ENVIRONMENTAL EXTERNALITIES

What do I mean by externalities? I mean theft as in "thou shalt not steal." I mean theft by the up-winders from the down-winders. I mean theft by the rich from the poor, by white from black, by the present from the future. That is an externality. Let me give you a couple of examples. My favorite one, because I have been there and spent quite bit of my time at the Sierra Club fighting this issue, is for the protection of the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. When discussing this issue, never call it ANWR, which is such an ugly word coined by the oil companies. It is the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a fantastically beautiful place and unique on the Arctic Ocean coastline. Next time you are near a globe, turn the globe so that you are looking at the refuge from the North Pole and observing the circumpolar shoreline. The coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is unique in the entire span of the Arctic. Standing on Sadlerochit Peak about 2,000 feet high and about 20 miles inland, I could see the ocean and pack ice, the shoreline, wetlands, tundra, and rolling foothills, and then, soaring behind me, the Brooks Range with hanging ice fields, a land of big animals-grizzly, wolf, polar bear, elk, moose, and the wonderful caribou.

People would have you believe that it is in our national security best interest and in our economic balance of trade interest to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, that last known potential pool, and to suck America dry at a time when oil is at its cheapest per barrel and when we are doing nothing to conserve it but are blowing it out our tailpipes and wasting it. That is the most egregious of all irresponsible attitudes toward the future. It is in the national security interest of whom? Our children? I think not. Leaving the last oil in someone else's nation—that is a good idea? Sucking America dry first when oil is cheap is a good idea for our children and for that energy resource? Absolutely not.

Examples abound. Tall stacks of the 1930s and 1940s allowed Dayton, Ohio, to put their soot up in the air so that residents of Columbus, Ohio, or people across the lake in Canada breathed it. Out of sight, out of mind. Chip Rawlings, author of the book Sky's Witness, is measuring the snow pack and the lakes in the Wind River to assess the impact that air pollution emissions from Los Angeles and Salt Lake City have had on that wild, remote place. In her book The Refuge, Terry Tempest Williams talks about the impact nuclear blasting had on Salt Lake City's downwinders. Just look at the morbidity rates on Shoshones and Navahoes from uranium mining and from those nuclear blasts, an externality of clear moral dimension. Look at East St. Louis, a city which

is almost entirely black and entirely poor, where the creeks glow in the dark and children ride bicycles through them and their tires do not last for very many months. The petrochemical plants around East St. Louis are located in other jurisdictions, in fictional cities which are separate from East St. Louis and isolated from the tax base and the electorate of East St. Louis. Talk about externalities.

Look at Cancer Alley along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. A Third World nation called Louisiana was seeking, until recently, a plastics plant owned by a Taiwanese company with a pollution record so bad that the Taiwanese government would not allow the plant to be located in Taiwan. When the company went looking for a Third World nation, it found one called Louisiana. The Taiwanese company proposed to locate the plant on an old plantation with two villages right next door, and guess who lives in those villages? The descendants of slaves live there in almost entirely black communities.

A survey was done about six months ago of the amount of toxic pollutants located in zip code areas of California. Does it surprise you to learn that the zip code areas with the greatest number of pounds of toxic emissions are in South Central Los Angeles?

One of my favorite externalities revolves around the price of gasoline in this blind nation of ours. When I was a child growing up in San Antonio, gasoline was 17 cents per gallon. At 17 cents per gallon, gasoline was more expensive then than it is today at \$1.30 per gallon. Gasoline has never been cheaper in the history of this nation than it is right now. If you have traveled in Italy, you know that to fill up your tank you must pay between \$5.00 and \$5.50 per gallon. Filling up the tank of even a tiny Fiat puts a heck of a dent in your wallet. You would drive differently in Italy.

One of the intriguing externalities is a direct result of our gluttony, our demand for cheap gasoline, and our willingness to waste cheap gasoline, particularly in the West. That externality is the likelihood that, if conservative estimates of sea-level increases from global climate are accurate, by the year 2050 between 100 million and 300 million people will be environmental refugees from deltaic Southeast Asia, forced to move from low-lying areas of Bangladesh, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam as sea levels rise. This would be a direct result of our willingness to not pay the full cost, to externalize so much of the cost, of cheap gasoline.

In Somalia, despite the current warfare, two nations of the European Community are working with local warlords to locate a toxic waste incinerator and a toxic waste landfill. Thus, when the fighting ceases, Somalians may experience another tragedy, perhaps one far longer lived. The European Community is

very willing to externalize from their calculus any of the health costs that might be visited on Somalians in the future. Somalians have black skin, so people in the European Community find it quite easy to externalize those costs on them.

About two years ago, I spent some time talking with Qu Geping, who is the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency in the People's Republic of China. Mr. Qu told me that he was gravely concerned for the future of my grandchildren as well as for the future of his own. He said, "I have every confidence that you in the developed world will sharply reduce emissions of carbon dioxide, but by the year 2050, almost every Chinese household will have refrigerators. Very few have them now. We will get our refrigerators just as your grandfathers did, cheap and dirty, using CFCs and soft coal as the power source unless you in the developed world pay the differential for non-CFC, solar, or other nonsoft-coal energy sources. If you in the West are willing to pay for that, then we will get it expensive and quick as opposed to cheap and dirty." Paying the differential is in our enlightened self-interest. I believe that this is one of our grandparents' externalities coming home to roost. We of this generation owe the Chinese and the Indians payment in compensation for overuse of the limited atmospheric sink that has led us to the brink of global warming.

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

Half of the examples I have just mentioned are western; half of them involve people of color, both domestically and abroad. I believe that a society that turns a blind eye to those externalities is a racist society. A racist society will not last long on this planet. Germany understands that and so does Japan.

Germany is acting on that understanding. There, regulations to be applied to automobile manufacturers in the near future will require that automobiles be built with recyclable parts and that each automobile manufacturer buy back an old car for every new car that it produces. The manufacturer must include in the price of every new vehicle the cost of buying back the vehicle, recycling the old parts, and putting those recycled parts into new cars. That is the kind of internalizing professional land managers could do. I reiterate: track down that wily externality, track it down and internalize it, just as if the future of our nation were at stake, because it is.

The era of an American environmental movement dominated by the interests of white people is over. We need to know that. Of the hazardous waste facilities in this nation and those companies involved in toxic waste emissions, 80 percent are located in or adjacent to communities of color while 65 percent of Americans of color live in polluted communities. Those locational decisions are made by the blind eyes, starved minds, and empty hearts of externalizers, the persons that I challenge you to root out. The morbidity rates of people of color in the United States are higher than of white people. Life and death issues are at stake.

I have had the privilege of attending a number of conferences over the last six months. The one held in New Orleans early in December was the largest conference on environmental issues that I have ever attended. About 2,500 people were there; 300 of us were white. The first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., attracted 600 people; 100 of us were white. In January, EDGE, an environmental discussion group coalition in California, brought together 300 people; about 100 of us were white. The communities of color understand this issue. Ben Chavis, a good friend of mine who is the new executive director of the NAACP, will be bringing environmental justice to the top of that organization's agenda.

I come to you as a westerner, but I come from the island nation of California. The island nation of California is the most diverse society every attempted on this planet. Within three years, those of us in the formerly oppressor class, or as my wife calls us, "people of pallor," will be in the minority. There will be no majority community. This already affects young people. My children went to grade school in an integrated community where they were part of the 15 percent that were white in the entire school district. The total number of white males entering the workforce in California by the year 2000 will be under 14 percent. California has the most diverse society that has been established, and the voters will reflect that diversity, not just in California, but in Florida, Texas, New York, Boston, Miami, and other places. The voters of this nation are going to be determining environmental policy.

In his inaugural speech, President Clinton said, paraphrasing President Kennedy, that we must ask not what is in it for *me*, but what is in it for *us*. He may not have known it, but he was joining me in asking that you track down that wily externality, track it down, stamp it out, internalize it. The earth is not just a commodity, it is mostly a resource that we depend upon.

CONCLUSION

I spent this past Easter morning almost alone strolling through Walden Woods and around Walden Pond with the mist rising off the broken ice on the surface of the water. Walden Pond is only six acres, but it is a very magical place. I was lucky to see it much the way Thoreau saw it: almost alone. For decades, Walden Pond has been the destination of millions of pilgrimages, from the 1930s through today. On a summer Sunday, as many as 25,000 people may be there because of what it symbolizes.

In our hearts, as Americans, we know that all of life is sacred and interconnected. We just have to correct our professional bias, our body economic, and our body politic with that spiritual reality. Remember the seventh generation and identify it. We are the seventh generation. I urge you to read again James Fenimore Cooper, who wrote seven generations ago in one of his Leatherstocking Tales called The Pioneers with tears in his words, about the killing of the bears and the over-harvesting of the maple trees. Track that externality down, natural resource professionals. Find it and root it out. If you do that, you will always, in small and large ways, answer "both" to the questions posed, and you will not allow your boss to continue to get the answers wrong.

Nancy Newhall ended her epic poem "This is the American Earth" with the words, "tenderly now let us commit ourselves and turn to the earth; it is time to remember tomorrow."