

Is environmentalism a floundering movement which has outlived its usefulness; kept on life support by zealots who cannot see that their goals have been achieved? In a word, no. Perhaps from the sheltered perspective of a suburbanite in the western world, admiring the homogeneous expanse of one's lawn, it is possible to convince oneself that the skies are blue, the waters run clean & clear and the world is once again a cornucopia laid at the foot of man. However, upon closer examination the shadow of the Earth's former bounty reveals an entirely different story; we are not out of the woods yet.

The ecosystem is an unknowably intricate fabric of interspecies relationships. This cloth provides services for its constituents, including man. While the the weave may withstand the excision of an occasional thread without unravelling e.g.; the dodo; one never knows when such an unfortunate loss may threaten the integrity of the whole. A wide range of plants and animals continue to face extinction worldwide, and more join the list everyday. While some such as the panda and koala are fawned over, others such as the kakapoa, wild peanut, and manta ray receive little public attention. Species loss is not limited to the southern hemisphere nor the Far East. In our national back yard, Americans, and the world at large risk losing the Florida panther, manatee, gila monster, whooping crane and the bristlecone pine to name a few. The relentless diminution of biodiversity has numerous driving factors ranging from pollution and development to over-exploitation and invasive exotics. Humans have transplanted species to ecosystems far removed from their natural habitat where they may wreak havoc unchecked. Often these immigrants have been part of well-intentioned efforts at biological control or soil erosion prevention such as the cane toad and japanese knotweed. Invasives have also been introduced for strictly economic purposes including the European hare in Australia and purple loosestrife in North America. As international trade increases, driven by the demand for fresh strawberries in December, stowaways such as formosa termites and the brown tree snake continue to spread of their own volition; aided by that most unnatural of beasts, the cargo freighter. International trade is promoted by the policies of NGOs such as the WTO and treaties like NAFTA which are conceived to spur economic growth. The manner in which such policies are pursued is often at the expense of, and may even forbid, consideration of the environment.

While there may be a movement to tear down underused dams in the US to restore riverine fisheries and ecosystems, elsewhere grand hydrological projects are taking concrete form. As the Three Gorges dam in northern China nears completion, an apparent symbol of progress, the fate of the Yangtze river dolphin, or baiji, is nearly sealed. One of only four freshwater dolphin species on Earth, the baiji and other endangered species such as the Chinese crocodile live in regions downstream of the dam are predicted to be deleteriously affected once the dam enters operation. Another big hydro project under consideration is the diversion of several Siberian rivers in Russia to the arid south. The plan is fueled by the desire to continue growth of the insatiable cotton industry in arid countries such as Turkmenistan. Diversion of regional rivers for agriculture has already caused the Aral sea, once an important fishery, to wither to a quarter of its former volume and one half the area.

The environmental problems facing humanity are not all about bunnies, butterflies and buttercups. They do not all rely upon a sense of altruism, many have anthropocentric or pragmatic foci as well. A large multi-faceted problem which needs to be addressed in the immediate future is that of energy use and supply. There is little doubt that our current energy infrastructure is a contributing factor in global warming. As the world population continues to grow and the economies of lesser developed countries approach industrial levels the need for energy surges. We in the west contribute as well, recent increases in standards of living have largely been a result of gluttonous energy consumption. Yet the energy we consume is largely wasted; many modern cars sold in America get fewer miles per gallon than the Ford Model T, but we balk at the thought of raising fuel efficiency standards. Meanwhile, in Haiti the population has scoured the countryside of trees and scrub and other biomass for use as fuel. Haiti's forest cover is now estimated at one percent; it is believed to have once surpassed seventy-five percent. To meet basic human needs the population has denuded a once lush and tropical landscape rendering it barren and unable to meet their future needs.

While it may seem as though we have at least conquered the spectre of toxics there in fact remain numerous obstacles including several hazardous chemicals in common use such as the so called Dirty Dozen persistent organic pollutants. Many environmental problems are intricate and interrelated. Decisions we make as a society and consumers have a significant impact. After performing a life cycle analysis of packaging Mcdonald's switched from styrofoam packaging to paper. However, while the previous styrofoam containers were recyclable the newer coated paper ones are not; contributing to the issue of burgeoning landfills. Knowing that styrofoam is not biodegradable, formerly manufactured with CFCs, and not widely recycled, one might opt for an "eco-friendly" disposable plate which is compostable. Such a plate, made from crushed limestone and potato starch, is no greener than the styrofoam in the long run as limestone is not a renewable resource.

In the absence of burning rivers it is easy to forget. Drinking bottled water, because it's fashionable, and filling the tank with the cheapest unleaded gasoline in history one has a privileged perspective -- nevermind that the water is more expensive than the fuel. Sure, one insists on "dolphin-safe" tuna for the kids' lunch and no longer uses CFCs, it's the least one could do after all. And so it is. Environmentalism is a vital and necessary movement that continues to call for thoughtful evaluation and introspection.