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Environmental Ineffectiveness

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Years ago when I was on the board of the Audubon Society, one of the group's main foci was recycling. Recycling is a complex business. Sometimes it makes sense to recycle, sometimes not, depending on the product, the materials it is made of, the location of the recycler relative to recycling facilities, and so on. The claim is sometimes made that recycling is beneficial because it adds to awareness of environmental problems. The counter to this is that a person wheeling their recycling to the curb past a five-car garage containing five large SUVs, one for each kid, could actually believe he or she is living an environmentally benign existence. Considering this complexity, I repeatedly suggested that Audubon recycling literature always include a statement to the effect that no matter how much recycling is practiced the collapse of civilization will be delayed very little by it as long as the human population and consumption by the rich continues to grow. Of course, no such statement was ever added.

The failure of environmental groups to deal with the drivers of environmental deterioration is in many ways understandable. Population concerns raise the issue of racism – and certainly some of the proponents of demographic measures want them applied against “others.” Environmental organizations want to be as large and inclusive as possible, so why bring up controversial issues that may be off-putting to many. Demographic measures also face religious barriers ranging from the immoral teachings of the Catholic hierarchy to the well-funded high priests of what Naomi Klein called “disaster capitalism” and other cults of endless economic growth and unlimited consumption.

Leaders of NGOs, even those who understand the situation, are thus loathe to tell the truth because of the potential effects on their recruitment and, especially fund raising. They often tend to be heavily dependent on foundation support. But those in control of large foundations are usually personally well-off and are slow to believe that the entire socio-political-economic system that brought them to the top needs dramatic revision. They believe incremental change

will cure society's ills. Thus they are reluctant to fund programs that would challenge those powerful religious beliefs. And the general public, victims of a broken educational system and corporate-controlled media, can hardly even imagine anything but business-as-usual. Why tell them the truth just because it might save civilization?

A good example of the plight of the NGOs was recently provided by Michael Brune, Executive Director of the Sierra Club, one of the most effective organizations trying to help preserve human life-support systems. A close colleague attended a speech by Brune in a small Colorado resort town. The audience was heavily environmentally-oriented people, many very well-off. Brune talked about the success the Club has had in killing coal-fired power plants in the U.S. – a very good thing. Reducing dependence on coal is a small but important start on the needed transition away from fossil fuel burning. But Brune totally ignored the key drivers of environmental destruction – America's continuing population growth and cultural addiction not to health and happiness of its citizens but to ever-increasing consumption. And he didn't note that the Club's wise emphasis on developing more solar power has a dark side in a world of perpetual growth – solar energy can be used to destroy human life-support systems just as can energy mobilized by burning fossil fuels. The bottom line was that likely no one gained any more insight about the drivers underlying climate change and other existential threats, nor the urgency of our environmental situation, even though many in that audience were clearly ready to deal with the drivers and the big issues. Now, then, is the time for responsible environmental leaders to be educating the public about them. The speech was unlikely to be of much help to the Club, since the omissions distressed knowledgeable people in the audience and at least one potential funder was disgusted enough to say that no more support would go to the Club.

One hope of the MAHB is that it can help push environmental groups and other elements of civil society to focus on drivers, not just symptoms, and to coordinate efforts to bring them to public attention. Any time you hear an environmental lecture or see a video or ad that does not at least direct people toward the malign roles of overpopulation and overconsumption by the rich, you are witnessing a lost opportunity.

MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

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