

Knowledge for What

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As I assemble these words into some order that might trigger reflection, fellow citizens are in the streets of Seattle protesting the meeting of the WTO (World Trade Organization). The media is portraying many of these folks as Chicken Littles with simplistic views of a world that is quickly changing. In a nutshell, these naive protestors just do not understand our modern economy. Yet unlike most of us couch potatoes, they have chosen to take the information that they do have, as imperfect as it might be, and act on it. As educator David Orr has suggested, "it is hard to get people motivated with the talk of parts-per-million or parts-per-billion. Yet so many of our environmental concerns are issues that move at glacial speed, or are only visible at levels beyond our everyday senses". Nonetheless, there is evidence that, as Norman Myers writes; "We have known for several decades, we are conducting a planet-wide experiment, disrupting the biosphere on many a side. It is eliminating tropical forests, it is creating deserts, it is dislocating climate itself, et lengthy cetera."(Myers, 163)

In the most recent issue of the journal *Environmental Conservation* (v.26, no.3 1999), there are two brief essays that address this heightened concern for action. The first brings to our attention a 1997 effort to establish a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities that has yet to be considered by the full UN General Assembly. Arthur Westing, associate editor of the journal, highlights two of the Declaration's 19 principles as being particularly relevant to our environmental challenges.

7) Every person is infinitely precious and must be protected unconditionally. The animals and the natural environment also demand protection. All people have a responsibility to protect the air, water and soil of the earth for the sake of current inhabitants and future generations.

9) All people, given the necessary tools, have a responsibility to make serious efforts to overcome poverty, malnutrition, ignorance and inequality. They should promote sustainable development all over the world in order to assure dignity, freedom, security and justice for all

people.

He urges scientists and citizens to move the declaration forward from favorable attention to resolution to binding covenant. In a more optimistic vein, he is hopeful that we might even translate the 1982 World Charter for Nature into a binding international covenant that explicitly guarantees appropriate rights for nature per se. (Westin, 163)

In the second essay, Dr. Norman Myers tackles the issues of scientific rigor and uncertainty head on in addressing our current environmental dilemmas.

Suppose a policymaker hears scientists stating they cannot legitimately offer final guidance about a problem because they have not yet completed their research with conventionally conclusive analysis in all respects. Or suppose the scientists simply refrain from speaking out in public (or even in journals) about the problem because they believe, in accord with certain traditional canons of science, that they cannot validly say anything much before they can say all. In these circumstances, the policymaker (or journal reader) may well assume there is therefore little to worry about for the time being: absence of evidence about a problem implies evidence of absence of a problem. By consequence, the policymaker (or journal reader) may decide to do nothing, and to do nothing in a world of unprecedentedly rapid change can be to do a great deal. In these circumstances, undue caution from scientists can become undue recklessness in terms of consequences; their silences can send a resounding message, however unintended. (Myers, 164)

These realities have fueled those who argue not to change anything about what we're doing, if we can't prove definitively that the release of genetically modified organisms are a problem or that global warming will not recede from whence it came. Even Stephen Schneider, one of the world's leading climate experts who spoke on my campus recently, cannot guarantee that the current warming situation we're in won't reverse itself before it's too late for us humans to exist. What environmental information can do for us is to give us bits of a picture. In the case of global warming, we know based upon the science available to us today that the global warming rate since the Industrial Revolution began is outside of anything we can document in the last 1000 years. Is it simply coincidence that the warming we are experiencing happens to correspond directly with the growth in the use of fossil fuels? We can't be absolutely sure. So is choosing not to act the right way to go? If one wanted to reduce the risk, one would rationally look at what we do know and begin to cut fossil fuel consumption, most importantly coal. The

precautionary principle would support such a policy -- to minimize risk based upon what we do know. The worst case scenarios that current models paint would suggest that we may not be able to change fast enough to prevent a disastrous climate change from occurring in the next 50 years. The less tragic predictions suggest we might.

Recently more than 100 leading scientists from 24 nations have issued a "World Scientists' Statement - Calling for a Moratorium on GM Crops and Ban on Patents". In this document they call for their governments to

- impose an immediate moratorium on further environmental releases of transgenic crops, food, and animal-feed products for at least 5 years
- ban patents on living organisms, cell lines and genes
- support a comprehensive, independent public enquiry into the future of agriculture and food security for all, taking account of the full range of scientific findings as well as socioeconomic and ethical implications. (Third World Network)

They go on to cite reasons aplenty for their concerns. Should they be ridiculed for stepping outside of the typical canons of scientific activity? Or applauded for challenging the dominant paradigm?

Ultimately all the environmental information in the world needs to be acted upon. Choices are made, sometimes proactively, frequently by indecision. And the foundation of any actions must be the values. There are no moral experts, although some would like to think they see the world more clearly than others. Ultimately all our decisions are better served when more people are engaged in dialogue about them. This becomes clearer when we begin to see the complexity and the depth and number of relationships that are involved in keeping this planet hospitable for creatures like us. I find it intriguing that the Green movement is perceived by most everyone to be a movement based solely on our relationship with the environment. If one looks more closely at the Greens you'll note that they have not one but ten key values. The values are not ranked in some hierarchy. Among those ten key values are probably more than one that you would not guess:

- Nonviolence
- Social justice
- Community-Based Economics
- Decentralization
- Future Focus/Sustainability

- Feminism
- Personal and Global Responsibility
- Respect for Diversity
- Grassroots Democracy
- Ecological Wisdom

It is the grassroots democracy that has held my growing interest and commitment. For the Greens see the absolute necessity of full participation in building sustainable communities. While some folks chide the Greens for the lengths to which they go to enable grassroots democracy, I think this is the only means of finding **lasting** solutions. Our society, through its educational system from K-12 through post-secondary, practices the antithesis of this value. By the time we exit the system we are rarely able to deal with multiple perspectives. We are processing information like computers in bits and bytes, on and off, yes or no. We reduce knowledge to disciplines and build walls around them, scrambling to argue who has the best vista to make the call. We fail to see the world whole. As educator Parker Palmer urges, after having learned to think the world apart, we now need to think the world together. We need everyone engaged. We need the group intelligence of the planet's inhabitants, locale by locale. This is where grassroots democracy can save us. When we can put away the arrogant assumptions that any of us could see or understand the world completely, then we might be able to sit down together, share our perspectives, and build lasting solutions that will allow generations to follow us. This is what learning should be. It should be the motive of the compiling and sharing of information we discover about our world and which we publish in these pages. Much of what we believe today we may learn to be false at some later date. But not to take precautionary action to prevent the potential destruction of our habitat will be a sin not forgiven by our children and grandchildren.

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