

Do We Have a Chance for Greener America?

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I immigrated to the United States 15 years ago. During this time, I was allowed to work, travel, save, spend, etc. but for the first time I had the right to vote in the political election. I was born, raised, and educated in Poland, so when I came to the United States a lot of people felt sorry for me as a someone who came from a totalitarian state and missed an opportunity to live in a democratic country. Did I really miss much?

This fall I had a chance to experience democracy first hand by expressing my political preferences. I wanted to vote for Mr. Ralph Nader, a Green Party USA candidate. As it turned out this was only an illusion. In Idaho, Mr. Nader's name was not even included on the ballot. Only later I learned that I could have added his name to the ballot and vote for him. I found this out too late. This was my first election and nobody mentioned this possibility. When the Green Party did not win the 5% of the popular vote, which would have ensured federal funding for the next election, I started to wonder how many people had made the same mistake. My first election was a frustrating experience.

The day after election more sad news arrived. David Ross Brower, one of the foremost environmentalists of our time who for many years inspired people all over the world to work together to protect the precious Planet Earth, passed away. I still have a vivid memory of June 1992, when I had a chance to meet Mr. Brower in person during the American Library Association (ALA) meeting in San Francisco. He was the main speaker in a program on "Poverty, Development and the Environment: Information Challenges for Libraries" organized by the Task Force on the Environment (TFOE). The program concentrated on the issue of how governments and citizens are working to address poverty and the environment and how libraries and librarians can help societies deal with these problems. For the first time and probably the last the TFOE program had a huge audience that came to listen to a great environmentalist. David Brower was a founder and chairman of Earth Island Institute; founder of Friends of the Earth (now in 66 countries, two million members); League of Conservation Voters; Fate of the Earth Conferences; Sierra Club Foundation; co-founder of John Muir Institute for Environmental Studies; executive director, Sierra Club, 1952-69; Nobel Peace Prize nominee three times; Blue Planet Prize, Japan, 1998; author of three and editor of about 100 books (Brower, 2001).

After this successful program the TFOE members were convinced that the

ALA would consider environmental issues more seriously. This did not happen until this year. For the past several years American librarianship has been led by themes selected by the American Library Association's presidents. The themes reflected the presidents' interests and provided a platform for action for 57,000 ALA librarians and library supporters. The last president, Sarah Ann Long, concentrated during her 1999-2000 tenure on a theme "Libraries Build Community." In her presidential address, Sarah Long stated, "Libraries in the United States have a unique opportunity to show their concern about the environment" ([Long, 2000, p. 7](#)). One of her initiatives was support for a special pre-conference workshop held at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago on July 6, 2000 ([Libraries build sustainable communities, 2000](#)). The main goal of this workshop was to teach the librarians community-building skills in order to promote sustainable development in their localities. I viewed my participation at the ALA workshop on "Libraries Build Sustainable Communities" as an opportunity to contribute to environmental protection efforts. Almost two weeks after the workshop, I had a chance to share my workshop experiences and newly gained skills with a group of public librarians attending a Summer Institute in Pocatello organized by the Idaho State Library. During the one-day session the participants discovered how libraries were uniquely positioned to become vital players in sustaining communities. The workshop focused on the involvement of public libraries in their communities at such levels as: economic development, air quality, land use, job training, health care, civic participation, literacy, or quality education. All together, the workshop was well received. The participants learned how to change the library's image in local communities by becoming active partners in building a more sustainable future.

For the first time since 1989 (when the Task Force on the Environment was created as a part of the Social Responsibilities Round Table) the ALA officially took action in recognizing the importance of the environment as one of the three components of sustainable development. As David Guyer stated "issues of sustainability will become more topical and newsworthy as the world's finite resources are consumed at an ever-increasing pace and as more second and third world nations attempt to adopt the lifestyles of their Western counterparts" ([Guyer, 2000](#)). The number of consumers is growing rapidly while at the same time the Earth's resources are shrinking. According to the World Wildlife Fund's 1999 Living Planet Report people have already destroyed 30% of the natural wealth in place in 1970 ([World Wildlife Fund, 1999](#)).

The solution for sustainable development requires not only community actions but also international agreements, which are almost impossible to attain. The latest example is The Hague Climate Summit, known also as the

COP 6, which took place between November 13-24, 2000 in Netherlands. Seven thousand specialists gathered to finalize the rules for operating the United Nations Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change from 1997. The industrialized nations had agreed to a five percent cut in emissions of six global warming gases (1) in the period 2008-2012, compared to 1990. This is an extremely modest requirement, when compared to the far deeper emission cuts of 60-80% that scientists in 1990 said would be needed to stop the progress of global warming (World Wildlife Fund, 2000).

The negotiations in The Hague on the Kyoto climate change protocol collapsed (United Nations, 2000). The main outcome of the summit was the agreement that global warming is real and that the industrialized world contributes the most to warming of the Earth's climate and that the poorest nations are experiencing the biggest harm. The United States, the leading carbon dioxide polluter in the world (50%), delayed effective solutions in international actions to cut global warming (Morgan, 2000). Greenpeace summarized the summit "as the moment when governments abandoned the promise of global co-operation to protect planet Earth" (Greenpeace, 2000).

If the governments are not strong enough to care about the planet Earth, who will? In May of 2000, I was invited to participate in the Planetnetwork conference on Global Ecology and Information Technology at the Presidio in San Francisco (Planetnetwork). The conference created a forum to explore the ways in which information technologies can contribute to create a sustainable future. During the conference sessions, I fully experienced the power of grass roots environmental activists. They represented different groups, approaches, solutions, and talents with one common value—struggle for the sake of the planet.

I have to admit that I put my trust in a greener, better world in the hands of environmental organizations and their active members. The American Green Party did not obtain federal funding for the next election but the fact that Mr. Nader was heard and supported by 3% of voters is significant. While the governments have failed to support our hopes and aspirations for greener America we still can rely on strong, ordinary people devoted to helping save our natural world.

Notes

1. Carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), hydrofluorcarbons (HFCs), perfluorocarbons (PFCs) and sulphur hexafluoride (SF₆).

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