

Editorial: Grassroots International Environmental Activism¹

Denis Hayes
Earth Day Network, USA

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Our species has always altered its immediate environment. Unwise irrigation practices by ancient farmers converted the Fertile Crescent-the fabled Babylon-into the desert wastes now known as Iraq. From the Dust Bowl to Chernobyl, we have fouled a lot of nests. But only in recent years did we acquire the capacity to modify the entire planet. In the last half of the 20th century, *Homo sapiens* became a geophysical force. We are now changing the climate and having a planetary impact on extinction.

The United States National Academy of Sciences and the United Kingdom's Royal Society issued a joint paper in 1992 that stated "The future of our planet is in the balance. Sustainable development can be achieved, but only if irreversible degradation of the environment can be halted in time. The next 30 years may be crucial." ² This, and scores of similar warnings, are not cries of wolf from overwrought extremists but carefully phrased warnings from some of the world's finest scientists. These scholars are trying to call public attention to the fact that the world has entered a dangerous new era. Global warming, a worldwide epidemic of extinction, the population explosion, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, desertification, the loss of rain forests, and other international threats pose unprecedented challenges to our embryonic global institutions. Avoiding irreversible planetary calamity is the primary moral obligation of our era. This profound mission is what makes the modern environmental movement more than "just one more special interest."

The modern U.S. environmental movement, and similar movements in other countries, grew out local concerns. American environmentalists worried about the impacts of toxic incinerators, polluted lakes and rivers, endless sprawl, and the clear cutting of nearby forests. They found ways to use politics, lobbying, litigation, boycotts, and other instruments to influence local and national decisions. Their impact has been astonishing. Just 30 years after the first Earth Day, virtually all Americans believe they have a *right* to a clean, healthy environment, and we have enacted powerful laws to achieve these ends. In the international arena, however, environmental values have generally been sacrificed on the altars of sovereignty and Mammon. Although the international community has banned ozone-depleting chemicals, restrained international trade in endangered species, and begun establishing restrictions on certain persistent toxic chemicals, these have been exceptions. On most global issues, environmental progress has been modest at best. More commonly, environmental problems have

just grown worse and worse.

The debate swirling around international trade expansion provides a good illustration of the difficulties in creating and sustaining international environmental values. Although caricatured as pro-trade versus anti-trade, the trade dispute is really more nuanced. Virtually no one is "anti-trade." Most environmentalists appreciate coffee, bananas, and Toyota Priuses. The dispute at World Trade Organization (WTO) demonstrations in Seattle and elsewhere has been between those who wish to use trade to improve the environment and to enhance the well-being of working people versus those focused exclusively on the near-term bottom line for one industry, or even one company.

Environmental values are not represented in any meaningful way at the WTO or in other international decision-making forums although the failure to incorporate environmental values is dangerous and shortsighted. Environmental problems are among the most vital international security issues in the world today. In part because environmentalists are excluded from participating in international forums, environmental leaders are beginning to seek ways to replicate globally what has worked inside individual countries-building a broad base of support from the grassroots up. They aspire to forge a global majority around environmental values. However, to be successful on the global stage, environmentalism must place new emphasis on becoming a truly inclusionary movement. This is of special political importance in global campaigns. The poor are a minority in America, but they are a large majority in the world. According to World Bank figures, 81% of the world's population would qualify for food stamps if they lived in the United States. The 50 nations of sub-Saharan Africa (minus South Africa)-with a combined population more than twice that of the United States-have a *combined* gross domestic product of \$198 billion, roughly that of the State of Virginia. ³ Rich Americans need to find ways to make common cause with poor Tanzanians if the African environment is to be saved.

What the world really needs is nothing less than a new institutional framework-perhaps a World Environmental Organization to parallel and regulate the WTO (much like the International Labor Organization). If international treaties are to mean anything, some agency, such as the United Nations Environmental Program, must be given the power to investigate and enforce compliance. This would be a fitting topic for discussion for the heads of state who plan to assemble in Johannesburg at the 2002 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development-the successor to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. But such major structural change will not be on the agenda. Once again, environmentalists

are seeking ways to lead their leaders.

Far-reaching changes inside nations have almost always been the result of grassroots, bottom-up pressure. Powerful economic interests have a big stake in the status quo, and they naturally do their best to make sure that nothing changes very much. Environmentalists learned that only broad, democratic impulses have the power to overcome political inertia. In the end, this may also be true in the international sphere. The Earth Day Network (EDN), is pioneering a new model of international engagement, creating Internet links among diverse environmental groups around the world. Most of these groups continue to focus their principal attention on local or national issues, but they seek to be tied in to the global environmental community. One day each year, they come together to focus on a unified theme. Earth Day has thus become the first secular, theme-oriented, global holiday (Hayes, 2000).

Each Earth Day affiliate-there are now more than 5,000 affiliates in 184 countries-celebrates Earth Day in ways that are appropriate to its culture, politics, and economic circumstances. The network operates cooperatively, rather than hierarchically. In computer speak, it has far more horizontal links than vertical links. This is the first small step on a very long journey-much as Earth Day 1970 launched this process in the United States. Earth Day Network is beginning to seek a global grassroots consensus over how best to address environmental problems that transcend national borders. As part of this dialog, EDN is attempting to enlist a broad range of participants over the next several years. Libraries (along with schools, zoos, botanical gardens, museums, and so forth) have been, and will continue to be, core vehicles for what has always been Earth Day's central missions-putting accurate environmental information into the hands of the public and introducing new generations to the principles of ecology. Libraries could play a particularly valuable role in this effort, in addition to their traditional role in community-oriented environmental education.

Hundreds of libraries across the United States take part in Earth Day every year, and in 2002 many of them will use the brand EarthDay@YourLibrary. Participating libraries typically sponsor special displays of books and periodicals around the Earth Day theme that is being emphasized that year. Some sponsor local environmental activities, such as essay contests, children's art displays, and tree planting campaigns. EDN welcomes librarians to log onto www.earthday.net in February or March every year to register activities that they plan to conduct on or around April 22 for Earth Day. Libraries could play a larger role in the globalization of environmental education and public participation. For example, librarians could encourage their patrons to log into the EDN site (www.earthday.net) on library

computers to see what is being planned in their areas and encourage them to check out EDN's award-winning electronic 'zine (www.gristmagazine.com) to get a brief, daily, global environmental news summary and superb background articles. Libraries could also encourage patrons to use the Earth Day Network website to see what Earth Day activities are planned around the world. Those additional efforts would advance the goals of putting information in the hands of the public and in the globalization of environmental values.

Endnotes

¹ Based on presentation for the Task Force on the Environment during American Library Association annual meeting in San Francisco, July 2001.

² Citation is from Royal Society and National Academy of Sciences. (1992). *Population Growth, Resource Consumption and a Sustainable World*. London; New York: RS; NAS. The quotation is also available at: http://csf.colorado.edu/pop/royal-society_92.html

³ Mead, Walter R. (September, 1999). How America Got Rich. *Worth Magazine*. Available at: http://www.worth.com/content_articles/ZZZLSHJU9FC.html

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Denis Hayes is chair of the Earth Day Network <www.earthday.net>, 1616 P St., NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20036-1493.