

B3-- "AN OPEN LETTER TO THE LEADERS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT: WHY YOU'RE LOSING THE WAR TO BUSH AND CHENEY", SALON, 9/5/02

Sept. 5, 2002 | "I feel deep shame when I look into the eyes of my grandchildren and think how much damage has been done to Planet Earth since I was their age." -- Jane Goodall, "People Power," Time, Aug. 18, 2002

"Standing in front of a blown-up photo of a tiny, purple, one-seat European car, Senator Trent Lott, the Republican leader, asserted, 'I don't want Americans to have to drive this car.'" -- "Senate Rejects Plan to Stiffen Auto Mileage Standards," New York Times, March 13, 2002

"President Bush distanced himself today from a report by his administration concluding that humans were to blame for far-reaching effects of global warming on the environment. 'I read the report put out by the bureaucracy,' he said." -- "President Distances Himself From Global Warming Report," New York Times, June 4, 2002

The failure of the Johannesburg Conference to produce a plan that will actually save the biosphere symbolizes the state of the environmental movement today. We are winning battles, like holding a major conference attended by more than 100 heads of state. But we are badly losing the war.

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The hundreds of millions of dollars spent on the environmental movement, and its countless studies, books, articles and hours of activism, are failing to halt the rapid deterioration of the biosphere. Most of our victories have been local -- preserving wilderness, cleaning up rivers and toxic dumps: important victories, but ones with little impact on biospheric threats like global warming.

Our work on global warming has done an impressive job in educating the public about the existence of the problem, but it has not succeeded in mobilizing real action to solve it. At Johannesburg, attendees were unable to commit even to supplying 15 percent of the world's energy from renewable sources by 2010 -- a small part of the effort needed to avert global warming and other biospheric threats. And while our promotion of renewable energy has made great strides since the 1970s, renewables -- not including hydroelectric power -- still comprise only 1 percent of world energy production.

Our strategy did not succeed even under a sympathetic president like Bill Clinton. Greenhouse gas emissions increased 12 percent between 1990 and 2000, despite Mr. Clinton's 1993 pledge to reduce them to 1990 levels by the turn of the century. Al Gore, who called for making the environment the "organizing principle of civilization," did not even organize his campaign around it. And under George W. Bush we are today merely fighting to prevent further losses.

The bottom line is that our movement has not mobilized a constituency in the developed world large and powerful enough to force corporations and politicians to make the long-term investments necessary to save the biosphere. It is clearly time for a rethinking that can produce a "human" environmental movement adequate to the new challenges we face. The key is the United States, which not only produces 23 percent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions despite

having only 4 percent of its population, but also blocked renewable-energy targets at Johannesburg. The fundamental question is this: What can so move Americans emotionally that they will be willing to make the massive investments necessary to save the biosphere at the cost of short-term consumption?

Until now, economics has usually trumped the environment. Auto companies succeeded in blocking higher fuel-efficiency standards recently by cynically playing on people's fears of job losses. Only if we can develop a case that touches feelings deeper than economic fears can we prevail. But how to do so?

The most powerful emotion we can tap in to is the universal human concern for one's children and grandchildren -- people's desire to transcend death by leaving their descendants a world worth living in. The fact is that people care far more about their children and grandchildren than for pandas, parks or windmills. And the desire to live on through our descendants is a far stronger drive than is commonly realized. We can build a new environmental movement that can save the biosphere around the theme of "investing in our grandchildren and future generations."

Much of our civilization is driven by our desire to find "immortality projects" that can give our lives a meaning that will transcend death. This is one reason parents have children, politicians seek to "make history," and people identify with nations and religions. The threat to the biosphere thus creates an opportunity to create constituencies in the developed world that never existed before, and that are necessary for the biosphere to be saved. Precisely because we are the first generation in history whose technological reach extends indefinitely, we are the first who can lead lives that will have real, tangible meaning for all humanity for the rest of time. The message we need to repeatedly bring into every household in America is this: "In the 21st century, our love and our expenditures to feed, house and educate our kids and grandkids needs to be extended to cleaning up the biosphere on which their lives will depend. If we fail to do so they will curse us, no matter what else we have done for them. If we succeed, we will

know that our lives will have real meaning for them and all who follow them."

Only this kind of message has the potential to mobilize the vast new constituencies needed to force corporations and politicians to make the investments needed to save the biosphere.

The focus at Johannesburg on the threat posed to the Third World was welcome and long past due. But history has shown that Americans cannot be mobilized for environmental action based on the Third World. They will act only when they can understand the threat in more immediate terms. Jane Goodall's chimps need to be saved. But this will probably only occur if enough Americans can come to feel the shame she does about what we are doing to all those who follow us.

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An open letter to the leaders of the environmental movement | 1, 2, 3

The idea of creating a new environmental movement based on the threat we pose to our own progeny rather than animals or the wilderness is not proposed as a simple change of rhetoric -- though massive TV advertising of this message would be necessary. Creating a new movement focused on investing in our grandchildren and future generations will require much more: a major psychological shift for a movement that basically sees people as the major problem, the "cancer" threatening other species on earth.

Many of us, including me, joined the environmental movement partly as a way of avoiding messy one-on-one relationships. Deeply hurt as children, we have tended to withdraw from close interactions with people other than our family or those who think like us. We often find greater satisfaction in our work, nature or spiritual pursuits than we do in hanging out with people, and we feel closer to animals than to the average human beings around us. It is this psychology that explains the fact that our calendars, TV ads, and conferences feature nature and animals more than human beings.

This aversion to deep and meaningful one-on-one human interaction is understandable, and it is as common in politics, business, journalism and the arts as it is in environmental circles. But it may be that only as those of us who care about the environment can rediscover the love for humanity that was so poignantly squelched within us as kids will we be able to meaningfully communicate with the millions of Americans who are more willing to invest in their grandchildren than animals or parks.

Not everyone will agree with this proposal. But whatever the debate about the future course of our movement, it must begin with an obvious fact: our present approach cannot succeed and we badly need a change.

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Human life is flourishing today compared with 100 years ago, if the most basic measure of human life is the number of humans times the number of years lived. Longevity, education and access to education are up, while infant mortality, slavery and outright starvation are down. We no longer face the kind of world or superpower wars that killed nearly 100 million people in the 20th century -- however serious ongoing local wars and terrorist threats. Women and minorities have made tremendous progress. Colonialism is dead. There is vastly more democracy, social justice and social welfare today than in the year 1900.

One of the few major areas of life in which we are incomparably worse off than a century ago, however, is the environment. People alive in 1900 did not even dream that a century hence the very biosphere that sustains human life would be under assault.

Of course, this is not the environmental movement's fault. On the contrary: Our movement has won innumerable victories and the planet would be far worse off without us. But we have been overwhelmed by events. We built our movement by persuading politicians to spend money on such short-term, tangible benefits as preserving wilderness and creating national parks; cleaning up rivers, toxic dumps, air quality and water; or saving lovable species. People could see the benefits of their expenditures.

But today we face a threat that no generation before us has confronted. The biosphere on which life depends is threatened by the combined impact of global warming, biodiversity loss, ocean and coral reef pollution, chemical contamination, water aquifer depletion, and deforestation.

These threats endanger future generations far more than ourselves. Saving them by making the massive long-term investments needed to preserve our biosphere will not yield as many immediate benefits.

There will not be new national parks for us to drive to, or lower cancer rates from less toxic fumes, or lovable species we have saved to stock our zoos.

It will cost significant money in the short run to combat global warming by subsidizing new renewable industries, raising fuel-efficiency standards, and creating electric, hybrid and fuel-cell vehicles. Combating biodiversity loss, ocean pollution and other biospheric threats will cost even more. As Amory Lovins, Paul Hawken and others have so brilliantly shown, such investments will create whole new industries and millions of jobs over the long run, and they will power our economy for decades to come -- much as early '60s subsidies for computer chips have driven our economy. But like all other investments, they will shift money from current consumption.

This fact lends itself to the kind cheap demagoguery exhibited by Trent Lott, who might have displayed the roomier Toyota Prius hybrid auto that gets 52 miles to the gallon rather than a tiny purple one-seat car. Self-serving and short-sighted politicians like Lott and our president will always be able to show that the costs of meeting long-term threats like global warming far outweigh the short-term benefits.

Saving the biosphere is thus largely a political issue. Although the vast majority of Americans consider themselves pro-environment, most do not vote that way. Nor can we count on corporations to save us by adopting pro-environmental measures on their own. Even the Ford Motor Company, run by strong environmentalist William Ford, fights fuel-efficiency standards, pushes SUVs, recently dropped its electric car program, and is far behind the Japanese in producing hybrid cars.

Only if we create a new political movement that can reach and inspire vast new constituencies to vote for the environment can we succeed in pushing corporations and politicians to do what is necessary to save the biosphere.

Whether we can do so depends on the answer to a deep biological, psychological and spiritual question: whether our evolutionary past dooms our future. E.O. Wilson, in his seminal article "Is Humanity

Suicidal?" presents convincing arguments that humanity is incapable of acting long term, primarily because our evolution has favored short-term over long-term thinking. But he also refers to counter-evidence indicating that people can think beyond their immediate needs.

Our generation will determine which point of view is correct -- and it is clear that we have no choice but to fight our short-term evolutionary impulses. The threat to the biosphere means that our species will prosper over the long term only if we who are alive today are capable of thinking long term.

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Any new environmental movement that can successfully challenge our short-term evolutionary impulses is likely to have the following four characteristics:

(1) Systemic. It will focus on the systemic threats to the biosphere we face -- that is, global warming, biodiversity loss, ocean pollution, etc. -- rather than such local issues as cleaning up a toxic waste dump or saving a patch of wilderness.

(2) Long-run. It will mobilize people to make long-term investments that will produce great wealth over the long run but not immediate, tangible benefits. CNN reports that "there is virtual unanimity among scientists that we have entered a period of mass extinction not seen since the age of the dinosaurs, an emerging global crisis that could have disastrous effects on our future food supplies, our search for new medicines, and on the water we drink and the air we breathe." Solving this crisis will cost us money but yield us few immediate tangible benefits.

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(3) Human. It will concentrate on touching the deep psychological cords that connect one generation to the other, grandparents to children and grandchildren, rather than continuing to focus on preserving the wilderness or animals.

(4) New constituencies. It will mobilize new supporters and groups of supporters rather than rely on present ones.

An obvious objection to this proposal is the following: Why should we believe that Americans who have rejected less alarming environmental claims, ones open to short-term and tangible solutions, should accept far more alarming and much more abstract warnings -- even though the fate of their children and grandchildren is being evoked?

There are several responses to this. First, the public will find it increasingly difficult to remain in denial about the catastrophic threat to the biosphere as the scientific consensus around global warming -- including Bush's own Environmental Protection Agency -- continues to grow, and events in the real world like the melting of the icebergs continue to occur.

Second, there is significant reason to believe that people are willing to make greater sacrifices for their descendants than for anything else. Adults today make enormous sacrifices and investments in their children and grandchildren's future. Most parents who can afford it do not put their kids on half-rations to maximize their own consumption.

The costs of raising a child, including college tuition, is a major portion of most household budgets. People bequeath their fortunes to their children and grandchildren, and the wealthy leave bequests to universities and other institutions. Even those without religious faith often find a transfiguring or unifying meaning in the love they have for their children.

Finally, keeping the debate in the present inevitably dooms us to failure. It is always cheaper to consume in the present than to invest in the future. It is only when we shift the debate more radically, to the existence of a future for our descendants, that we have a chance of winning.

But while there is much reason for hope, we can only realize it if we are willing to make a massive effort to reach people using the most powerful message we have. An organization here or initiative there is unlikely to succeed, given the power of those pushing short-term economic thinking.

A successful campaign would require a sophisticated and large-scale effort that includes creating a message focused on the threat to our grandchildren, a strategy to take this message into every home in America, and tactics capable of mobilizing the millions of people necessary to force the politicians to make long-term investments in our future. It would focus particularly on reaching the young people who will be paying the price for our profligate actions.

Given the limited amount of money available for environmental funding, part of such a campaign would see existing environmental organizations shift a portion of their present scientific and technical effort to a more sophisticated psychological approach focused on the human issues involved.

In addition, it will be necessary to create entirely new organizations. From their founding, they would be focused on educating the public about the threat to future generations and on building support for measures that can save them.

Our present legal system, for example, gives representation only to those now alive and leaves future generations at our not-so-tender mercy. Since we are the first generation to so threaten our descendants, we have an urgent need to create legal protection for them. One way might be to create Public Advocates for Future Generations in every city in the nation and to give them the budgets and power to represent the coming people of the earth.

All of this does not imply, of course, that existing environmental efforts should be abandoned. They are necessary to educate people about the threats facing their grandchildren and future generations. All those involved in the movement dedicated to saving this planet have done an honorable job and have nothing to apologize for. But new objective conditions require a new movement. As Joseph Campbell said, there is no shame in climbing down our ladder and moving it to a new wall when conditions warrant. We err only when we remain on it despite the overwhelming evidence that the wall on which it rests is crumbling.

It is clearly time to move our ladder.

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About the writer

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