

Where Do We Go From Here?

By Richard Evanoff

"Despite their dedicated good work, if we examine all or any of the businesses that deservedly earn high marks for social and environmental responsibility, we are faced with a sobering irony: If every company on the planet were to adopt the environmental and social practices of the best companies — of, say, the Body Shop, Patagonia, and Ben and Jerry's — the world would still be moving toward environmental degradation and collapse."

This quote, from Paul Hawken's article, "A Declaration of Sustainability," which appeared in the September/October 1993 issue of *Utne Reader* (p. 55), really got me thinking. If our best attempts to create Green businesses are insufficient, what then do we really need to do to create an ecological society? Hawken bases his claim on what he perceives as contradictions in even the most socially responsible businesses: that they can simultaneously "make the world better, can grow, and can increase profits by meeting social and environmental needs." He debunks this myth, however, by writing, "It's a have-your-cake-and-eat-it fantasy that cannot come true if the primary cause of environmental degradation is overconsumption." Sally Irvine makes a similar point in her article, "Beyond Green Consumerism" (reprinted in *Green Business: Hope or Hoax?*, edited by Christopher and Judith Plant, New Society Publishers, 1991). We delude ourselves if we think that "shopping can save the world." Sure, as consumers we can exercise a certain amount of influence over companies and get them to produce less ecologically damaging products, but unless our total level of consumption also declines, we won't be able to create a truly sustainable society.

The same basic principle applies, I think, to a lot of the activities we do as environmental activists. There's one branch of Green thinking, for example, that emphasizes "lifestyle changes" as the best way to save the environment. The idea is that if everyone started living simpler lives, consumerism would be undercut. Without any demand for their products, companies would stop producing them. Companies themselves often excuse their complicity in environmental ruin by saying that they are simply trying to satisfy consumer demand. Of course, the fact that they also go to great lengths to stimulate consumer demand through advertising, planned obsolescence, and all the rest, belies their claim to innocence. I'm whole-heartedly in favor of making lifestyle changes along the lines suggested by Duane Elgin in *Voluntary*

Simplicity (Bantam Books, 1982) and Bill Devall in *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends* (Peregrine Smith, 1988), but I do not believe that merely by composting my garbage and recycling milk cartons we're going to usher in a new ecological age. In other words, we can't change the world simply by changing ourselves.

The same goes I guess for changing our "inner consciousness." I really enjoy hiking and camping and getting out into nature, but my own appreciation for the beauties I find there are not going to save them from future development and destruction. Touchy-feely new age rituals for reconnecting us with the Earth, capital E, are great if you like to touch and feel — which I do! — but they're not going to save the Earth, capital E, either. And although religion — something I feel very deeply about even though my views on it are pretty unconventional — can bring us to greater levels of self-realization and help us extend our compassion towards every living (and non-living) thing, for most people it remains a personal quest for salvation from the world rather than a commitment to the complete transformation of the world.

Among the socially committed there are the citizens' groups that are working mainly to solve local problems which directly concern the lives of their members. The empowerment many people experience in these groups cannot be underestimated, but the groups themselves are often isolated from each other and too preoccupied with their own problems to look for more comprehensive solutions. NGOs have a bit wider scope and the people working for them are really on the front line of contact with the environmental bad guys in both corporations and the government. I really admire the NGOs for being able to confront all the lame excuses, indifference, and bad logic they encounter from both corporations and the government. But working within our present system and simply trying to reform it through lobbying efforts probably won't be enough. Besides, begging business and political leaders to do something about the environment also helps to legitimate their claim to power. What environmentalists would really like to do, I think, is to reestablish that power on different foundations, namely the grass roots. Even Green political organizing is suspect in my book. If all the Greens intend to do is to gain access to the traditional halls of power, the possibilities for cooption and corruption are endless. Greens will end up being nothing more than the environmental wing of the status quo, able to come up with even greater "green-washing slogans" than the leaders of business and government come up with today. I hope that the Greens will have a more constructive role to play in society than this, of course, but it will only happen by challenging, rather than being absorbed into, politics-as-usual.

Clearly we cannot trust the leaders of the present system to take care of us, to be concerned about our future or the future of our

children, or to act responsibly towards either society or the environment. For years the government, scientists, and business leaders have been telling us, for example, that nuclear power is safe and that we have nothing to worry about. Now we read that because of "budget cuts," nuclear clean-up programs are increasingly being looked at by the powers-that-be "as dispensable, environmental frills" (Jessica Mathews, "After the Nuclear Party, Cleaning Up Isn't Optional," in the *International Herald Tribune*, December 14, 1994). Nuclear waste needs constant attention for something like 250,000 years and we can't even trust these guys to take care of it for 25! Corporate leaders today openly claim that they have no responsibility to society other than making a profit for their shareholders (see Doug Bandow's "Social Responsibility: A Conservative View" in the same issue of *Utne Reader* quoted above for the proof). In the U.S., government officials slash budgets and social services — often with the support of the middle class — not because of overspending but because of underfinancing. The transnationals close down factories, people lose their jobs, the tax base disappears, people don't have the money to buy the products the companies are making, the government can't afford to provide basic services, and the economy as a whole goes into a tailspin. And while the companies themselves are recording record profits, the blame for all our social and economic decline gets shifted onto environmentalists, welfare mothers, inner city youths, working women, gays, ethnic minorities, and radicals in general.

Kicking out the Republicans in favor of the Democrats and vice versa, as is done in the U.S., or starting new political parties with the same old faces and basically the same old ideas, as is done in Japan, gives the semblance of change but does absolutely nothing to address our real problems. But are the alternatives we environmental activists are all so busy working on really enough either? By themselves, probably not — even taken together, probably not. Personally I compost my garbage, practice meditation (or contemplation, as it's called in the Western religious tradition), help out with several grass roots citizens groups, volunteer time to NGOs, am a card-carrying member of the U.S. Green Party, and even write a column for *Japan Environment Monitor*. But because I live my life within the context of our particular political and economic system, I'm often forced to do things its way whether I want to or not (I can't walk to work, for example, as my grandfather and all previous generations did). Many of the environmental and social problems we presently face are systemic problems and the only way we will be able to solve them is by completely changing the system. When the whole organism is sick you need more

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than just band-aids to fix it. Indeed, this is the main thrust behind radical environmentalism's disillusionment with mere reformism.

I propose, then, that we need a new economic order based on ecological production for human need rather than on unecological production for profit. We need a new political order centered in democratically controlled local assemblies rather than in undemocratic and secretive international organizations. We need a new spiritual order based more on a this-worldly concern for the future of the planet than on an other-worldly pining for a future in heaven. We need a new social order based on abolishing hierarchy between races, genders, countries, and classes and on promoting both biological and cultural diversity. In the meantime, everything we're doing is remedial — necessary to be sure — but insufficient. Living organisms regenerate themselves by dying and giving birth to new organisms. Exactly the same sort of regeneration is needed in our human institutions. □

Richard Evanoff will be temporarily suspending the ecoLogic column in order further his studies in environmental ethics at Lancaster University in England.

New Report Calls for International Forest Convention to Counter Massive Species Extinctions

A new report released by the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) entitled *How to Save the World's Forests* calls for urgent efforts to establish an International Forest Convention to counter escalating extinctions of wild animals and plants caused by uncontrolled global deforestation. The report is released to coincide with the opening of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) in New York where the future of the world's forests will be discussed.

EIA's new report accuses the international forest and timber products industry, with an estimated annual trade value of US\$40 billion, of being completely out of control and of obstructing every effort to promote international regulation of this vast trade.

Wasteful and excessive consumption of timber products by northern societies, led by the US, UK, Germany, the rest of Europe, and Japan is driving an ecological catastrophe as forests are destroyed, states the report. Thousands of other endangered species are all threatened with extinction as a result of deforestation. More than half the world's land-dwelling species of plants and animals

depend on forests.

The United States is the world's largest importer of forest products, consuming around US\$14.7 billion worth (17 percent of global production) each year, despite having only 5 percent of the global population. Tropical deforestation alone is now estimated at 17 million hectares per year, an area three times the size of Switzerland.

The report calls for a new, legally binding International Forest Convention to act as an international framework for the conservation and precautionary use of the world's remaining forests.

EIA's Canadian-born chairman, Allan Thornton, today said "International import bans of timber products will become the major international priority to counter the destruction of the world's forests and the wild animals, plants, and people who rely on them for their survival. The CSD meeting in New York provides a last chance to save much of the world's remaining forests."

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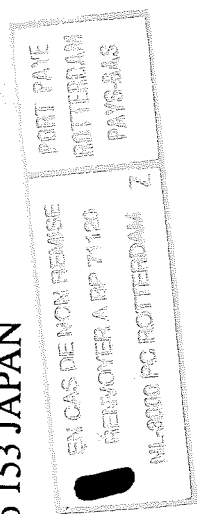
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