

ESTABLISHMENT ENVIRONMENTALISM & CHANGE WITHOUT CHANGING

By Scott Thompson

“The mainstream environmental community as a whole has been the ‘ultimate insider.’ But it is time for the environmental community – indeed, everyone – to step outside the system and develop a deeper critique of what is going on.”

– James Gustave Speth, School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Yale University

Sometimes a revolutionary movement has a spark of creativity and truth which lights up the public’s imagination. Eventually powerful people realize that in order to protect themselves at least some of the groups urging far-reaching change must be granted a bona fide role in society. There can actually be a bonus for the society’s honchos in doing so: utilizing the symbols and terminology of such groups can aid in stabilizing the mainstream political and economic order while seeming to change it.

I call this change without changing.

So it is that mainstream environmentalism has thrived by focusing on environmental work that does not fundamentally threaten the mainstream political and economic order, such as preserving large tracts of wild land or fighting pollution from coal-fired power plants. And while these efforts are important, and probably necessary, they don’t effect the radical social transformations – change itself - that are essential in order to save planetary ecologies in the long run.

Another irony is that what has become vital to establishment environmentalism’s prosperity is appearing to save the environment. Yet another irony (they’re stacking up, aren’t they?) is that this appearance is maintained by the sincere belief of those working within mainstream environmentalism that they are indeed doing all things possible to save the environment.

We can see how far establishment environmental groups have distanced themselves from the essential transformations – change itself - by looking at three crucial issues. The first two have been obvious since at least the 1960s to any environmentalist not on life support, while the hair-raising nature of the last has become apparent to the best climate scientists in the last 3-5 years.

The first issue: significantly reducing the human population. Let’s initially draw from Edward Abbey and Gary Snyder here.

Abbey’s comments, vintage 1968, crackle with energy. Bear in mind that the U.S. population at the time was 200,700,000: “It will be objected that a constantly increasing population makes resistance and conservation a hopeless battle. This is true. Unless a way is found to stabilize the nation’s population, the parks cannot be saved. Or anything else worth a damn. Wilderness preservation, like a hundred other good causes, will be forgotten under the overwhelming pressure of a struggle for mere survival and sanity in a completely urbanized, ever more crowded environment. For my own part I would rather take my chances in a thermonuclear war than live in such a world.” (*Desert Solitaire*, Touchstone version, p.52).

Since then the U.S. population has ballooned by over 50% to 308,400,000 (U.S. Census estimate).

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In 1969 Gary Snyder published his seminal “Four Changes,” a twelve page article that crystallized environmental priorities from a deep ecology perspective. While he wrote with a cooler hand than Cactus Ed, he was even more pointed: “There are now too many human beings, and the problem is growing rapidly worse. It is potentially disastrous not only for the human race but for most other life forms...The goal would be half of the present world population or less...The long-range answer is a steady low birthrate...the measure of ‘optimum population’ should be based on what is best for the total ecological health of the region, including its wildlife populations.” (*A Place in Space*, pp. 32-34).

When he wrote “Four Changes” the world population was 3,631,000,000. Since then it has soared to 6,840,000,000, by a current estimate. Almost double. Snyder’s goal was 1,816,000,000 or less.

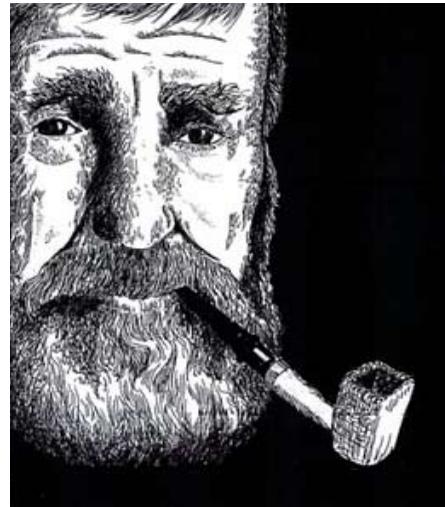
Today human overpopulation can be candidly described as a world-wide emergency. In their 2003 book, *One With Ninevah*, Stanford biologists Paul and Anne Ehrlich, who are nothing if not candid, estimate that humans have already overshoot the Earth’s carrying capacity by as much as 40% (p. 69). They said: “Addressing the population factor must be a crucial part of any successful global strategy for achieving a sustainable civilization.” (p. 184). It’s self-evident that none of the grave environmental problems the Earth faces, including global warming, will be solved in the long run without reducing our numbers until we are no longer depleting the ecosystems we live in.

The Ehrlichs and their colleague Gretchen Daily have estimated that the optimal long-term global population for a sustainable civilization on our planet is about 2 billion people. That’s what the human population was in 1930. (p. 184-185). Richard Heinberg, in his 2003 book, *The Party’s Over*, cited a study by Russell Hopfenberg and David Pimentel that made the same estimate. (p. 226).

So: ask yourself if the establishment environmental organizations on your own plate are keeping this issue front and center on their websites. Check this out when you get letters from them seeking donations.

But you’ll find that very few of them do.

Second issue: repudiating exponential economic growth. Here is Gary Snyder in “Four Changes:” “To grossly use more than you need, to destroy, is biologically unsound...humanity has become a locustlike blight on the planet that will leave a bare cupboard for its own children – all the while living a kind of addict’s dream of affluence, comfort, eternal progress, using the great achievements of science to produce software and swill...a continually ‘growing economy’ is no longer healthy, but a cancer...Economics must be seen as a small subbranch of ecology...” (pp. 38-39).



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In 1968 Edward Abbey said, “Growth for the sake of growth is a cancerous madness...an economic system which can only expand or expire must be false to all that is human.” (*Desert Solitaire*, p. 127). In 1982 he added: “We hear the demand by conventional economists for increased ‘productivity’...Productivity of what? For whose benefit? To what end? By what means and at what cost? Those questions are not considered. We are belabored by the insistence on the part of our politicians, businessmen and military leaders, and the claue of scribes who serve them, that ‘growth’ and ‘power’ are intrinsic goods...As if gigantism were an end in itself.” (*The Best of Edward Abbey*, p. 298).

James Gustave Speth arrived at similar conclusions in his 2008 book, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*: “Right now, one can only conclude that growth is the enemy of environment. Economy and environment remain in collision...Capitalism as we know it today is incapable of sustaining the environment.” (pp.57, 63).

Among other things, he found destructive correlations between exponential economic growth on the one hand and increases in environmental impacts on the other, and between increasing incomes on the one hand and many negative environmental impacts on the other. (pp. 51-52, 56-57). The pattern is simple: the more the economic output grows, the more damage relevant ecologies suffer.

He is also skeptical that reducing greenhouse gas emissions and continued economic growth are compatible processes: “In the carbon dioxide example, almost half the required rate of [technological] change is needed simply to compensate for the effects of economic growth...Perhaps it can be done. I am doubtful...” (p.114).

And he did contend that markets could be effective, at least in theory, if prices included environmental costs, which they now do not. This phenomenon is known as “market failure.” But Washington lobbyists and the government that works for them have been unwilling to make this happen, and that phenomenon is known as “political failure.” (pp. 52-54). The trouble is that way too many powerful people have way too much money invested in keeping these failures going.

So: do the mainstream environmental organizations you’re interested in openly advocate on their websites either for scrapping growth economic models in favor of no-growth models (for example, Daly and Farley, *Ecological Economics*) or at a minimum insisting that all environmental costs without exception be included in market prices?

The best bet is that they’re either silent or waffling on that one.

Third issue: reducing atmospheric CO₂ to 350 parts per million or less FAST (the current level is 387 ppm and rising by 2 ppm each year).

By late 2005, NASA scientist James Hansen was openly talking about recent paleoclimate research showing that the planet is perilously close to global warming “tipping points.” Once the oceans and atmosphere heat up beyond a critical point, amplifying feedbacks - accelerated by methane releases from ocean sediments and arctic tundra - will take the process of global warming out of humanity’s hands. The result will be catastrophic sea level rises of “tens of meters” from melting ice sheets and also massive species extinctions due to “unnaturally rapid shifting of climatic zones.”

Every good mainstream environmentalist knows this much. The sticking point is that in late 2007 Hansen determined that the safe level of atmospheric CO₂ is actually 350 ppm or less; that we are dangerously close to the tipping points right now. Up until then it was thought that some additional warming was safe. Another 1.2 degrees C or maybe 0.7 degrees C. In other words, it was thought that there was leeway for at least a modified version of business as usual.

For more change without changing.

As expected, governments in developed countries are ignoring what Hansen and his state-of-the-art colleagues have to say. Instead, they are promoting cap and trade plans; their idea is that by gradually reducing the annual quantity of greenhouse gas emissions, humanity can keep future warming within safe levels without unnerving either the business world or the public.

Hansen is scornful of these cap n' trade schemes. He's too polite to simply call them bullshit, but that's what he means. Here are his reasons: (1) merely reducing the rate at which greenhouse gases are emitted will only delay our arrival at the tipping points, not prevent it. (2) That's because cap n' trade does not force governments to collectively choose which huge reserves of fossil fuels - almost certainly coal and fuels like tar sands - to leave in the ground. Forever. (3) It's also because cap n' trade schemes do not rapidly make renewable sources of energy less expensive than fossil fuels, thereby leaving the latter with the bulk of their historic subsidies. (For the above, see Hansen's new book Storms of my Grandchildren).

When it comes to global warming, Hansen's reasons delineate the difference between change without changing and change itself.

So: do the major environmental organizations you're interested in keep 350 ppm front and center on their websites?

350.org does, but I bet you'll find few others.

A solid indication of what's behind change without changing in big time environmentalism can be found in Jim Stiles' outstanding story, "The Greening of Wilderness (Part 2)," in the August/September 2008 issue of the Zephyr. He describes mainstream green board members who are, let's see, up to their asses in coal or nuclear, or backing an airline that massively farts CO2, or who have been convicted of securities fraud, and so on. Not exactly behavior that is congruent with green exemplars like Rachel Carson, John Muir, Adolph Murie, or Edward Abbey. Mainstream enviros have responded to Stiles' story by either ignoring it or dismissing him as a "disgruntled conservationist."

Which meant that he hit the bulls eye: more than a few of the people who donate bagfuls of money to mainstream environmental organizations or who serve on their boards are ardent fans of both market failure and political failure. That's the point.

I can think of three motivations for their largesse to the major green groups.

Wealthy environmental donors and board members know that once recipient organizations have large operating budgets they will be exquisitely careful to not bite the big hands that feed them.

Speth gives us the first: "The eco-efficiency of the economy is improving...However, eco-efficiency is not improving fast enough to prevent impacts from rising...things are getting worse at a slower rate." (The Bridge at the Edge of the World, p. 51). The irony is that by slowing down the rate of environmental destruction, mainstream environmentalism is in fact supporting exponential economic expansion, and with it ever-increasing population growth and ever-increasing CO2 emissions. It has unwittingly given an unworkable system even more time to degrade ecologies and continue its relentless trajectory toward global warming tipping points. Change without changing.

Wealthy environmental donors and board members know that once recipient organizations have large operating budgets they will be exquisitely careful to not bite the big hands that feed them. And that in time they will learn to carefully avoid advocating for change itself, because that's precisely what the bite is.

A second motivation is that green credentials are important to protecting one's brand in the global business world these days. So there is a kind of perverse common sense operating when an environmental scoundrel shovels money into a well known green group and then participates as a board member (think of the photo ops). It reminds me of my childhood in the small town South in the 1950s and 1960s, where the local businessmen were solid financial supporters of the respected churches around town. This was a necessary step in order to bolster their business reputations. If they slipped off to the whorehouse after being seen smiling in church, their reputations as respectable businessmen were nevertheless safe. There may be a comparable process happening with green credentials today.

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A third motivation for some is a sincere desire to help the environment, while avoiding any risk to their economic interests.

To wrap up now. It often happens that when we set out to solve a vitally important problem, we end up perpetuating it, in spite of our best intentions and our initial idealism. It's particularly sad in the case of establishment environmentalism, because there is much to respect in the people who work within it. Many of them have given up business or professional opportunities which would have made them much more money, and they carry out pragmatic tasks that matter.

Functioning as they do within the mainstream environmental box, they probably do not like the idea that on a fundamental level their work is perpetuating the system they entered the field to change. I expect they are even less fond of the thought that they are conferring green business credentials upon polluters who come to them with mixed motivations at best.

And they especially don't appreciate Jim Stiles calling attention to the absurdity of their circumstances.

Absurdity and sincerity make strange companions within one's psyche.

Scott Thompson lives in Beckley, WV and is a regular contributor to The Zephyr.

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