

Life-Styles and Nature Conservation

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One of the key papers at the Technical Meetings that accompanied the IUCN General Assembly in Zaïre was Dr Dasmann's showing how the emphasis in nature conservation has shifted. No longer can the 'biosphere people' – the people of the developed nations who draw on the resources of the whole world to maintain their life-style – simply urge developing countries to 'protect' wildlife and establish national parks while at the same time pressing them to cut back their population growth. One extra person in the USA will consume more in energy and materials than 20 extra people in Tanzania. What Dr Dasmann calls the 'ecosystem people'—those who depend for all their resources on supplies within their local ecosystem – lived in balance with nature and, moreover, did not live impoverished lives. Today we can only solve our world problems by getting back to some better balance, 'the old partnership with nature that existed without people being aware of it'. What we need, he suggests, is 'conservation as if people mattered' and 'development as if nature mattered'. Nature conservation today demands new life-styles.

I doubt if many people feel easy about the future of mankind, or our ability to protect and maintain the networks of plant and animal life upon which the human future ultimately depends. Nor do I believe it likely that many of us believe that the hope for the future lies in more research, or in some new technological fix for the human dilemma. The research already done has produced truths which are generally ignored. We are reaching the end of technological fixes, each of which gives rise to new, and often more severe problems. It is time that we got back to looking at the land, water, and life on which our future depends, and the way in which people interact with these elements.

Our attitudes towards the future of mankind and the human environment vary considerably with our point of view. Those of us in international organisations are likely to assume a globalist viewpoint. To a globalist, environmental and human problems often appear to be without solution, or their solution involves such massive inputs of money, energy, raw materials, education, and so forth, that any effort seems puny. But only a few environmental problems are really global in nature – and even they usually have solutions which can be applied rather easily at the local level. For example, if we are really threatening the stability of the ozone layer by using aerosol spray cans, it is a simple matter to give them up. They add virtually nothing to the quality of living for any individual, and those who manufacture them can make just as much money doing something else. The future of whales is a global problem, but its solution involves only a change in attitude of comparatively few people in a few countries – and some redeployment of economic effort.

Most conservation problems exist on particular pieces of ground, occupied or cared for by a particular group of people. Attempts to solve them at a global, or even national level often strike far from the mark, because they

fail to take into account the attitudes or motivations of the people concerned. Globally it appears virtually catastrophic that a world population of four billion people is continuing to increase in the face of declining reserves of energy and minerals, and world food reserves that can be wiped out by the vagaries of weather and climate. Globally it appears vital that population growth be brought to a halt, quickly, by whatever means are feasible. To somebody in Zambia or Zaïre, where land and resources are relatively vast in relation to the numbers of people, this attitude seems either absurd or malevolent, although it may appear totally realistic to a person in Barbados or Bangladesh. It is also apparent to those who think about it that the addition of one person in the United States, which consumes inordinate amounts of energy and materials per capita, is far more likely to bring the world closer to crisis, than the addition of 20 new people in Tanzania. Similarly, food problems viewed globally are solved by massive transfers of wheat or rice from one place to another, and the establishment of world food banks. But the long-term solution to such problems probably lies in making each local community, each province and state, relatively self-sufficient in food – or at least capable of quickly attaining self-sufficiency if this be required. A Bengali who is dependent upon the uncertainties of weather in Kansas for his day-to-day survival is in a perilous condition indeed.

Solving Local Problems Nationally

During the past few decades people have been encouraged to look to their nation's capital, or worse yet, to the United Nations, for solutions to problems that had always been considered, in the past, to be local affairs. But the tendency to depend upon the national government for decisions on the management of local resources inevitably creates delay, confusion, and often ends up with the wrong solution for each local community through trying to reach the right solution for all. Thus, providing water for a nation's population, as viewed from the top, can mean the need to build giant dams and canal systems, costing hundreds of millions of dollars, and taking many years. At the local level providing water may mean only developing some roof-top collectors, storage tanks, and giving some attention to the management of vegetation on the local hills and valleys. It might take a little money, some labour, and a few months of effort to improve the situation. But who will make that local effort if the responsibility lies with the government, and particularly if the government is likely to over-ride such a local initiative? Similarly, the provision of electricity, viewed from the top, may seem to require the installation of a massive, high-risk, nuclear plant, and an environmentally disruptive national grid of power lines. It could also mean, at the local level, the installation of a windmill, or a small stream diversion through an axial flow generator.

It is true that the simple local solution does not appear to work for the people in big cities. But there are questions we need ask about that also. Why are people crowding into big cities? Would it not make more sense to provide for them to move back to areas where they can look after themselves? Why do we build cities in such a way that their inhabitants are forced to become helpless dependents on agencies they cannot control? Since we must rebuild most cities, anyway, why not build them to encourage in each neighborhood the greatest degree of self-reliance, local initiative, and self-sufficiency?

If we attempt to conserve nature at a national level, we pass a great number of protective laws and hire people to enforce them. We establish a number of protected areas, and hire people to patrol and manage them. Decisions on protection, management, and administration are made by experts in the capital. Agencies come into existence with administrators who rarely have time to visit the field. We know the results, they are all around us. For each new protective law, we develop new specialists in the circumvention of that law, greater in number than the law enforcement agents. For each area in a national park or reserve, a larger area outside is degraded or made less productive. Or so it has seemed to go.

Ecosystem and Biosphere People

In some earlier papers I have promoted the idea that human societies can be divided into two categories, with some in transition from one to the other. These are *ecosystem people* and *biosphere people*.

Ecosystem people are those who depend almost entirely upon a local ecosystem, or a few closely related ecosystems. Virtually all of the foods they eat, or the materials they use, come from that ecosystem – although there will be some limited trade with other ecosystem groups. Because of their total dependence on a local system, developed usually over many generations, they live in balance with it. Without this balance they would destroy it, and cease to exist, since no other resources are available. The balance is assured by religious belief and social custom – everything is geared to the rhythms of nature – to phases of the moon, changes of seasons, flowering and fruiting of plants, movements and reproduction of animals. Such people have an intricate knowledge of their environment – the uses of plants for food, fibre, medicine. Every species, every thing, in their environment has some meaning or significance. Recent studies have shown that most such people did not live impoverished lives. Instead they tended to have adequate food, good health, abundant leisure – many of the features of the good life that others today strive for and rarely achieve. Once everybody on earth was in this category. Now only a few so-called ‘primitive’ peoples, living more or less in isolation, survive.

Biosphere people are those who can draw on the resources of many ecosystems, or the entire biosphere, through networks of trade and communication. Their dependence on any one ecosystem is partial, since they can rely on others if any one fails. Drawing as they do on planetary resources they can bring great amounts of energy and materials to bear on any one ecosystem – they can devastate it, degrade it, totally destroy it and then move on. All of those who are now tied in to the global network of technological society are biosphere people. They are the people who preach conservation, but often do not practice it.

If we were to enquire when nature conservation in Africa was most effective, the answer would be ‘long before the words ‘nature conservation’ were ever spoken’. Nature conservation prevailed in Africa in the days before the agents of the biosphere societies first appeared – in other words before European technological society put in its appearance. In those days everybody lived in what we now call national parks, and scarcely any species of animal or plant could be called threatened. Now the global conservationists and national administrators of the biosphere culture try desperately to pro-

tect species and to establish national parks in places where ecosystem people once lived. Effective conservation is at its lowest ebb. This is called progress. In the old Africa there were decision makers in the villages. Their decisions seemed to favour conservation. Now we try to influence national planners in the capital to achieve nature conservation. But the village decision maker still decides whether or not he will kill the last leopard in his stretch of country. Something is out of balance. Can the balance be restored?

We have lived too long with the idea that there is merit in bigness – an economy of scale that is important to efficiency. We suffer from the delusion that international or national organizations are best equipped to solve all conservation and development problems. It is a delusion. Aid poured in from the top with the idea that it will filter down and benefit poor people seldom filters very far. The filters are too fine, and scarcely anything drips through. Bigness creates dependency. Economies of scale lead to sociologies of economic helplessness. This should be increasingly obvious. The British economist E. F. Schumacher's book *Small is Beautiful*, subtitled *Economics as if people mattered*, should be required reading for decision makers, large or small. I think it is time we were talking about 'development as if people mattered'. We might then begin to build a system from the ground up that was ecologically sustainable, that would continue to provide for humanity for all time to come.

The Future for Tropical Rain Forest

Marc Dourojeanni has pointed out the trifling amount of tropical rainforest that has actually been included in effective national parks or equivalent reserves – less than two per cent – probably not one per cent if we were to include only those reserves that functioned as they should. He has further noted that in Peru, if plans go through, we may see 10 per cent of the rainforest protected. In other words, at the culmination of an impressive national conservation effort, 90 per cent of the tropical rainforest is still left available for forms of use that will certainly create major modifications if not destroy it completely. If this does happen, what will be the fate of the islands of rainforest left in national parks. Will they be secure? It seems unlikely. Our host country, Zaïre, has an impressive array of national parks. Those listed in the UN list cover over seven million hectares. But nobody can really believe that conservation can be effective if we have 10 per cent or less of the country in protected areas and the rest of the country is wide open to exploitation. To be meaningful we need to begin to restore conditions in which conservation will be a way of life for most people, where it will be a partner in development activities, where agriculturally productive land and natural areas are interspersed and the village forest is as important as the village field. In other words we need to restore some of the old partnership with nature that once existed throughout Africa. In the old days the partnership existed without people being aware of it. Now, with more people, we need a more conscious partnership. Some so-called 'primitive' groups of people today still have it. We could all learn from them.

It is not suggested that any people be forced to live without the real benefits that technological advancement can bring: education, medical care, communications, transportation efficiency, and so on. It does mean, however, separating the gold from the dross – accepting the benefits while rejecting the

energy and material wastage, the unnecessary consumption of scarce materials, all the useless activities and societal patterns that end up with alienation of people and environmental impoverishment. What we really need is “conservation as if people mattered” and “development as if nature mattered”.

Local Problems, Local Solutions

To get there from here I believe we must aim at selective decentralisation. Authority to solve local problems should always be held at the local level. Development should be localised, at a human scale, and intended to solve human problems. Nothing should be done by the province that can be done better by the village. Nothing should be referred to the nation that can be solved by the province. Those most likely to be directly affected by development decisions should have the most active role in reaching those decisions. No development decision should be made without full exploration of its effects upon human society and the natural environment. This does not mean that the local, the small scale, should prevail in all activities. Transport networks need national coordination. Copper mines, smelters, refineries will require massive inputs of energy and labor – they cannot be supplied by a few wind generators. Equally, however, one does not need a gigawatt power plant to meet the energy needs of farms and villages. In fact supplying energy needs in such a way inevitably creates the feeling of alienation and dependence that results when one has no understanding or control over one’s means for survival.

The energy panaceas that were being advanced with confidence a decade ago are likely to be a lethal problem in themselves and no solution to any existing problem. Any nation that pursues the nuclear energy alternative not only increases the existing rate of fossil fuel depletion, but further opens the path to nuclear war, nuclear blackmail and sabotage, the high risk of nuclear-power-plant accident, and finally the impossible task of finding a secure means for disposal of nuclear wastes. The nation that adopts the nuclear option helps to endanger the future of life on earth and almost guarantees the growing restriction of human freedom imposed by the need for increasing security measures. Furthermore, it is no answer to the energy problem, but may mitigate against finding long-term solutions.

What Not To Do

To those nations that wish to pursue the technological development alternative, apparently offered by the past behaviour of such countries as the United States, the answer is that there is *no way* such a pathway can lead to long-term economic development. The energy and materials-wasting economy of the United States should be an example to the rest of the world of what *not* to do. There is no possibility that it can go on for very much longer without impoverishing the world. All the evidence from energy analysis, materials analysis – or most particularly from the increasing alienation of people from identification with government policy and practice – show that present trends cannot and will not continue. Any country that hopes to follow this example is following a path to nowhere, from which the United States must find some way back.

The development pathways that hold promise are those that make most

intelligent use of locally available, renewable or inexhaustible energy resources – those based on the sun and the derivatives of solar power, wind, vegetation, wastes, hydropower and the like. Using these and basing development on local, conservation-oriented, land-use practices, building from indigenous knowledge and skills each nation can find a way for improving the lot of its people – not just for a decade or two, but for the foreseeable future. Somehow the political decision makers at high levels of government and the economists who advise them must be made conscious of the need to find ecologically sustainable ways of life. That these in turn will be oriented toward nature conservation is inevitable. Unfortunately I know no way short of serious catastrophe to persuade many national decision makers of the need to shift away from short-term solutions. Politicians live for the short term. So I can only suggest that the local decision makers, the people themselves, hang on to whatever they can of their traditional ways and build slowly on them to achieve economic development at their own pace, and on their own terms. Faced with the arrogance and recklessness of governments of nation states, who prefer the glamour of jousting with one another in the international arenas of power to solving the problems in their own domains – this is not much hope. But it is all there is to offer for most of the world, when political leaders prefer fighter planes to manure spreaders.

Hypocrisy

Thus far I have not mentioned the word 'life-style' although I have been talking about the problem. However, if important decisions for the future must be made by individuals in their local communities – then the attitudes and ways of life of each individual become important. It is no use preaching pacifism if you work in a munitions factory. Is there any point in preaching conservation if you live in a style that wastes energy and materials and places excessive demands upon the world's living resources? Most of us, I fear, have grown up with the idea that conservation was the responsibility of governments, and that the duty of conservationists was to persuade governments to do the right thing. The idea that the first duty of a conservationist was to practice a conservation life-style only really became obvious when the ecological truth became known that the population crisis, the energy crisis and all other crises were interlinked and related to how each of us lived from day to day. In the 1960s a generation of young people grew up in the United States and in some other countries who began to accuse their elders of hypocrisy – because they preached peace while they waged war, and talked ecology while working for organisations that exploited the environment. Many of those I know simply refuse to work for agencies or companies that wage war, exploit the environment, or threaten the future of the planet. They would rather go hungry. Often they do go hungry, but most can find non-exploitative ways of life.

I personally believe that conservation organisations and agencies have a particular responsibility to practice a conservation-oriented way of life. I do not want to point any fingers – but it would be interesting to know how many gallons of jet fuel were burned, how many trees were cut down, how many kilowatts of electricity burned to bring us all together here in Kinshasa? It would be interesting to know also whether we have influenced any decision makers as a result?