

THE WHOLE WORLD IN OUR HANDS

Our old way of thinking has driven our planet to the brink of disaster. Only a new set of principles can save it.

Gerald O. Barney

Sunday, December 31, 0

I am directing [the Executive Agencies of the U. S. Government] to make a one-year study of the probable changes in the world's population, natural resources and environment through the end of the century. This study will serve as the foundation for our longer-term planning.



-- President Jimmy Carter, environmental message to Congress, May 23, 1977.

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The one-year clock had started three months earlier, when the president signed the directive for the report. The Government Printing Office needed three months to print it. So only six months remained to prepare a study of the future of the world for the president of the United States.

In the end, however, "The Global 2000 Report" was a phenomenal success, selling 1.5 million copies in nine languages - one of the Government Printing Office's all-time best-sellers. President Carter has it on display at the Carter Center in Atlanta as one of his 12 most important accomplishments.

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Regarding global trends, it concluded that if policy everywhere continued unchanged, the world in 2000 would be more crowded, more polluted, less stable ecologically and more vulnerable to disruption than the world in 1980.

This conclusion has, unfortunately, met the test of time. As World Bank data show, in the last two decades the world's rich have steadily become richer, and the poor more numerous. As Redefining Progress, an Oakland public-policy organization, has shown, the amount of land we humans need to live - assuming we were to change and use Earth's resources at the rate we could sustain indefinitely - has now reached 1.3 Earths.

The rub is that we have only one Earth available to us, and until we change technologies and lifestyles, we will continue to erode and reduce its capacity to support us all.

Regarding the foundation for the United States' long-term thinking that the president wanted, our efforts were stymied by the fragmented nature of the government's organization. The analytical tools the agencies use to prepare economic, population, food, energy and other projections for the president were (and are still) housed in computers scattered all around Washington, D.C.,

and these tools contained (and still contain) seriously contradictory assumptions.

We concluded: "The executive agencies of the U.S. government are not now capable of presenting the president with internally consistent projections of world trends in population, resources and the environment." This conclusion, however, was excised from the summary of the report, which misleads with a tone of confidence about the quality of the government's long-term thinking.

Despite its great success, there was, for various reasons, limited official U.S. follow-up to "The Global 2000 Report." President Carter was not reelected and thus had no opportunity. Presidents Reagan and Bush had different priorities. President Clinton needed to separate himself from Carter.

Internationally, however, "The Global 2000 Report" (along with many other reports and efforts) helped set in motion a series of important developments. In the early 1980s, a diplomatic initiative based on Japan's assessment of Global 2000 helped create the U.N.'s Independent Commission on Environment and Development and the Rio Earth Summit. The developments continue and include the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategies and the United Nations' upcoming Rio Plus 10 conference in 2002.

But these developments are not nearly enough. We humans could do everything the World Bank and United Nations are even considering and still destroy Earth.

I agree with Thomas Berry, author of "The Great Work," that our first priority is to understand the severity of what we are doing to Earth and ourselves and the magnitude of the changes required if we are to turn toward a sustainable way of living on Earth.

For the past 4 billion years, Earth has managed its own affairs through the functioning of its biogeophysical systems. But that arrangement has ended. Now Earth controls itself largely through human decision and human control over the physics, chemistry and biology of the planet.

So far, we are not doing well. We are demonstrating a culturally suicidal disposition toward biocide - the destruction of the life systems of the planet - and geocide - the devastation of planetary processes on which all life depends. The damage we have done already can be compared only with the last massive extinction 65 million years ago, which wiped out perhaps half of all species, including the dinosaurs. We are wiping out more species faster than at any time since then.

The ultimate cause of our actions is a severe cultural disorder: We have no globally accepted ethical framework to guide us in our new global responsibilities. Just when, for the first time, we find ourselves faced with the ultimacy - the irreversible destruction of the Earth's major life systems -

we find ourselves ethically destitute, caught in the grips of a paralysis of judgment about what is happening and what we need to do.

Our self-destructive behavior is sanctioned by the very structures of our culture. The ethical framework of Western industrial culture assumes a radical discontinuity between the human and the natural world. We assume we are a transcendent ruler of the other-than-human, that we are the source of all rights and all values. We assume we have the right - even the obligation - to alter to the fullest extent possible the natural functioning of the planet to our exclusive benefit. We think all other earthly beings are simply instruments to be used; that Earth is just a collection of natural "resources" or commodities to be bought, sold and exploited for human benefit; that every plant is a weed and every mineral is just another rock until it is in use. We assume Earth has no sacred dimension, no inherent rights and no way of escaping economic exploitation.

Our great classical cultures and spiritual traditions seem to have little guidance to offer on these issues. They have been concerned primarily with human-human ethics, not with human-Earth and interspecies ethics. They have been unable to prevent the destruction we are inflicting on Earth. They have not even been able to provide an effective critique of what we are doing. They alone cannot guide the great work facing us in the 21st century.

For guidance now, we must reach further back, to where human origins connect with those of the larger Earth community. After centuries of empirical observation, we have learned that humans are the part of Earth that has become conscious and has taken responsibility for the whole. We are now beginning to realize that we must live as a mutually enhancing presence with the larger community of life on Earth, that our destiny and Earth's are one.

Based on this new knowledge, humans gradually are developing principles of ethical behavior that are accepted across cultures and across religious and spiritual traditions. Three documents - "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,"

"Towards a Global Ethic" and "The Earth Charter" - are key efforts to define a basic ethical norm for both human-human and human-Earth relations. "The Earth Charter" - due for presentation to the United Nations in 2002 - makes clear that the well-being of the whole Earth community is a fundamental priority.

As "A Call to Our Guiding Institutions," a 1999 interfaith declaration from the Parliament of the World's Religions, makes clear, success depends ultimately on reorientation of the basic establishments that determine human life in its more significant functioning: religious and spiritual traditions, governments, international and global organizations, business corporations, educational establishments, science and technology, communications media and civil society.

The challenge to our religious and spiritual traditions is to provide criticisms of what humans are doing to Earth and to expand the interpretation of their rituals to include the great transformations of the universe and Earth. Within the context of a new vision, it may be possible that the religious antagonisms of the past can be overcome, the individual traditions revitalized and a sense of the sacred can again empower and sustain human affairs.

Among the institutions guiding us, the university has a special place as the teacher of all the professions controlling human endeavor. The challenge to our universities is to shift from teaching how to exploit Earth to how to develop an intimate relationship with Earth. Ecology and the cosmology of Earth and the universe need to become the foundation of all professions, courses and programs.

Governments and legal institutions have adopted constitutions and laws extending the individual rights of humans without recognizing corresponding rights for the other components of the natural life community. Legal enactments, for example, give humans "property rights" to occupy and exploit the land. The challenge to governments is to provide for the legal rights of geological and biological - as well as human - components of the Earth community. Habitat for other species, for instance, must be given legal status as sacred and inviolable. A legal system set up exclusively for humans is not realistic.

Corporations now own or control the natural resources of the entire planet, directly or indirectly, but they have no proportionate responsibility for public welfare. The challenge for corporations and for all other institutions is to replace the dominant profit motive of the corporation endeavor with a dominant concern for the integral life community.

For science, the challenge is to assure that our human technologies are coherent with the ever-renewing technologies of the planet itself, while remembering always that science is only beginning to understand nature's complex ways.

How awesome it is to be alive today. We never dreamed we could damage Earth,

and now awaken to our ruthless exploitation. We never asked for responsibility for Earth's future, but discover we are now managing the planet and must accept responsibility and accountability for our own future and that of Earth. Our hope is for a new era, when humans and the greater community of life on Earth will be a life-giving presence to each

other.

A change so basic will be extremely difficult - the most difficult task humans have ever undertaken. The key lies in creating a new inner vision. Until we succeed in finding that new vision, the human future will remain in question.

This transition is our task for the 21st century. We must all contribute. No one is excused. What we do in this century will be remembered forever - or not at all.

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I would like to see the Global 2000 process revived. It was killed when I left Washington because of a political aversion to long-term planning with an emphasis on the environment. It ought to be resurrected and concentrated in the National Academy of Sciences, not the federal government. It ought to be supported by the major corporations. It wouldn't take much money. This we can do collectively, as men and women committed to sustainable development, to a better quality of life, for all those on Earth.

- Jimmy Carter, in the forward to the revised edition of "The Global 2000 Report," 1991

RESOURCES

Key documents that define a fundamental ethical norm for both human-human and human-Earth relations include:

- "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" - www.un.org/Overview/rights.html
- "Towards a Global Ethic" - www.cpwr.org/calldocs/EthicTOC.html
- "The Earth Charter" - www.earthcharter.org .

Important documents related to these topics include:

- "A Call to Our Guiding Institutions" - www.cpwr.org/calldoc.html
 - "The Ecological Footprint" - www.rprogress.org
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HAVE YOUR SAY

-- To reach us: Respond to THIS WEEK'S TOPIC at sunday@sfgate.com, or join the discussion at sfgate.com/vent/sunday. For other ways to reach us, see Page 8.

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