

Can American Society Make Sound Environmental Decisions?

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Thirty years ago I addressed this question and have continued to do so over the years. The question is deceptively simple; it has no simple answer, and the question is not new. Thirty years ago in a paper entitled "Environment and the Shaping of Civilization" (1970) I wrote:

Can we really elect to have a high-quality environment? Does the structure of American society—pluralistic, democratic, historically biased in favor of an "every man's laissez faire"—permit the shaping of its environment in any way other than by combat and compromise? The question is not whether conflicts of interest in the environment can be eliminated. There is no prospect, in a diverse world, that they will be. A second practical question is how to raise the levels of information and social concern at which the process of bargaining and accommodation occurs. To improve the human environment, both man and politics must be improved. Men make politics; political institutions influence human behavior; and behavior is heavily influenced by attitudes, beliefs, and values. Purposeful shaping of the environment involves the purposeful shaping of outlooks on life. The quality of the future environment depends, therefore, upon the shaping of attitudes, beliefs, and values through present education.

To find a meaningful answer to the question "Can American Society Make Sound Environmental Decisions?" four subquestions must be addressed. To the extent that we understand their relation to our primary question, we may arrive at a contingent answer. It will be neither yes or no, but rather, it all depends. Americans may be able to make sound environmental decisions if they can overcome the obstacles. Some of these obstacles will emerge in answers to the following subquestions:

- I. Political rhetoric aside, in what respects do Americans really constitute a socially coherent society capable of making sound environmental decisions?
- II. Do Americans share attitudes and beliefs in common sufficient to support truly societal decisions? How do people understand the environment? Are environmental issues more consensual or are they more divisive than many other issues?
- III. By what criteria do people assess the soundness of an environmental proposal? What credence is given to scientific findings?
- IV. Through what processes, procedures and institutions, public and private, are environmental decisions made? What are the effects of conflict, compromise, mediation, and leadership on social decisions respecting the environment?

I. Societal Coherence

E Pluribus Unum (from many one), the motto of the United States, is symbolic of our federal union of States. Only in political rhetoric is it invoked to declare the unity of the people of the United States. American society should be distinguished from the American people. American "society" refers to the aggregate population of the United States—its difference subsumed within a common political system. The "American people" is generalization, including many diversities—ethnic, racial, religious, economic, intellectual and geographic. For a "social decision" to be effective, some significant sector of the whole society must be in agreement. It is not necessary that it be a majority of the whole, but it must be a dominant sector—conceptually and politically. In many "democracies," a politically active class effects to speak for the whole. In America today it is reasonable to hypothesize that a large part of the "body politique" is concerned primarily with personal affairs and secondarily with entertainment (i.e., with America's largest area of enterprise including sports). From the viewpoint of some commentators, e.g., Neil Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Americans are being distracted from real world concerns to the detriment of the nation. David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) conjectured that play

has become a major, possibly *the* major, aspect of American business. Clearly, the cultivation of civic virtue has not become a national pastime. Participation in public policy decisions is obviated for a large number of Americans by apathy, indifference and by preoccupation (often necessary) with personal affairs. Some groups, however, form organized efforts to skew "public" decisions toward serving their own purposes—often economic.

Among modern democracies, the United States has one of the lowest percentages of citizens voting in elections to public office. A declining percentage of the population shares a common sense of history. Asian Americans hardly share the legacy of 1776. Some African American representatives reject the legacy of the so-called founding fathers, (notably Washington and Jefferson among others) as slave holders. As the percentage of Americans of non-West European origin increases, the cultural basis for a common societal ethos appears to shrink. Of course there have been deep divisions within Anglo-European political and religious beliefs. And many non-Western immigrants have embraced the ideals of American political democracy as they understand it. The Constitution of 1789 was, of course, a compromise among differing and deeply held opinions. And this toleration of differences was broken by civil war in 1860. It seems that consensus on civil principles, transcending differences, requires maintenance or renewal from generation to generation.

In what respects do Americans today share a common set of values? There is substantial literature on this subject, but some insight may be provided by sampling the soap operas, talk shows, and religious televangelists. From representatives of the self-styled conservatives comes the declaration that the nation is engaged in a "culture war" between traditional values and licentious liberalism linked to feminism, multiculturalism, and environmentalism. This opinion may more often reflect ideology than reality. Nevertheless there is evidence of significant cultural fractures in American society. That environmental decisions should be identified as one of them is also evidence of a widespread misconception of

the meaning of the environment in human affairs.

II. Attitudes and Beliefs

To generalize concerning differences among attitudes, beliefs, values, and opinions dividing society risks oversimplifying reality. A generalization is never a self-contained unexceptional truth. All generalizations are approximations, or they identify tendencies. Individuals of some particular persuasion may nevertheless differ in the breadth, assuredness, or intensity of their feelings.

“Environment,” as this term is now increasingly understood, has had no history in traditional Western political ideology. Particular aspects of the environment, e.g., forests, wildlife, and landscape were matters of social concern, but the environment as an inclusive system was not conceptualized. When, in the 19th Century, environmental issues began to emerge, as in urban sanitation and physical planning, an expanded role for government was required. As environmental awareness also expanded and was at variance with customary attitudes and behaviors, differences arose in public opinion over the necessity for the extension of governmental controls over public nuisances and protective measures for public health. By the 1960s, an environmental movement emerged on a collision course with conventional 19th Century economic and political laissez-faire values and the traditional individualism present in American society. To the extent that environmental policy has led to intrusion into affairs which conservatives believed to be private, “environmentalism” has been seen to be un-American, to be subversive of private enterprise, private property rights, and a conspiracy of hostility to economic growth.

In contrast, environmental concerns have become a top priority of the deep ecology movement which rejects the individualistic man-centered view of life for a broader life-centered perspective in which mankind is a member, but not the master, of the community of the living species on Earth. This attitude is consistent, although there are epistemological differences, with the scientific concept of “environment” as an ex-

pression of the total cosmic system—from microcosm, ultimately extended over incomprehensible space and time.

Popular concepts are more phenomena-specific and person-related. From a popular viewpoint “environment” has been identified with various forms of pollution. Indeed, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was initially described by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* as an anti-pollution measure.

Differing from these perspectives are those of traditional religious faiths in which the Earth was created as the home of humanity and over which mankind was given dominion. In contrast are those “modernized” religious beliefs in which humans are responsible moral custodians of the earth, owing to their gift of exceptional intelligence and technological creativity.

Given these ranges of attitudes and beliefs, it appears that achieving sufficient consensus for societal decision-making is no simple process. It requires a high degree of interactive collective learning through information, leadership, and experience. It must become a possibility resulting from both formal and informal education and experience.

Attitudes toward the environment reflect attitudes toward life and the world. People live in the short-term present, and in many cultures they have little compelling concern for the condition of future generations beyond their immediate offspring. Posterity does little for present generations. Nevertheless, the first of the six principles declared under Section 101(b) of NEPA states that “it is the continuing responsibility of the Federal government to use all practicable means, consistent with other essential considerations of national policy, to improve and coordinate federal plans, functions, programs, and resources to the end that the nation may—(1) fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations.” Bruce Tonn of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory has proposed that this transgenerational principle be institutionalized in a Court of Generations that, in effect, would see to its implementation.

Economic welfare is a necessary priority for people, yet it too often has been attained, short-term, by exploitation of resources and environment in disregard of future opportunities and environmental integrity. The national resources concept, essentially economic, conceives the environment as a storehouse of potentially usable materials. No economic value has been placed on nature and natural materials *per se*. Their monetary value has been determined by processes of the market. Recently, however, ecological economists have been imputing significant measurable values to ecosystem services for air and water quality, soil stability and fertility and, in some measure, to maintenance of beneficial “balance” among living species.

Supplementing these general remarks a more systematic analysis may help to clarify why people hold mutually contradictory attitudes toward the environment. For many—perhaps most people—two levels of attitude may be distinguished: (1) emotional reaction to particular environmental conditions and events and (2) conceptual basis for interpreting the world and how it “works.” Of course, in the human mind these levels are interactive—immediate reactions often being influenced or predetermined by deeper continuing beliefs and values.

Personal attitudes and actions directly relating to the elements and forces of the environment may vary greatly depending on the effects of these forces and how they are interpreted. Under relatively unexceptional circumstances nature, broadly defined, may be taken for granted. But under eventful circumstances, environmental forces may be regarded as beneficent or hostile—a dichotomy especially common to agriculturists. People often attribute malevolence to environmental events such as earthquakes, volcanoes, landslides, violent storms, floods, droughts, and plagues. These natural events become human disasters when people put themselves at risk through lack of knowledge or of prudential foresight—for example building on floodplains, on or near unstable terrain, or in areas hosting endemic disease.

In modern societies there are numerous organized groups with concerns focused on

particular properties, aspects, or uses of the environment. These interests reveal a broad range of values which people hold with various degrees of consistency and intensity. They may be, but seldom are, sharply defined of mutually exclusive categories, and may be classified abstractly as esthetic, ethical, economic, and scientific.

As has been noted, how people entertain their personal interest perspectives is influenced by their broader and basic beliefs about the nature of the world and how it works. This is the ideational level of understanding. It influences the personal level of perception and reflects cultural or societal interpretations of reality. In modern society these interpretations are notably religious and utilitarian (i.e., economic), and are the virtual imagery of popular beliefs about the cosmos and human relationships with it. The unscientific science fiction of television and the movies may be highly entertaining, but may it not also leave some viewers with a confused sense of reality?

How these personal interests and ideational perspectives are affirmed or reconciled in human minds obviously influences the extent and substance of societal agreement or difference on environmental issues. The way in which these various perspectives are contested, combined, evaluated, and are projected into policy decisions may be described as the sociopsychological-psychological basis of environmental decision making.

From the evidence of present world conditions and trends, it seems apparent that humans as a species have not learned how to live for a sustainable future on earth. Humans have been shown to be adaptive to change, and yet the legacy of the 20th Century has left humanity with numerous environmental problems for which there is no evolutionary or historical experience. Nuclear energy, exploding populations of people, ethnic violence, and overstressing of natural systems (e.g., fresh water) are examples of a much larger number of similar problems. How confident can we be that human society will arrive at desirable, sustainable responses to the risks that it has created?

Obstacles to consensus have been documented in a comparative study edited by Peter L. Berger—*The Limits of Social Cohesion: Conflict and Mediation in Pluralist Societies*—a report of the Bertelsmann Foundation to the Club of Rome (1998). Nevertheless it has often been asserted that informed intelligence can overcome cultural limits and that there are no limits to the reach of the human mind. This is a statement of optimistic faith, but there is no way to confirm its validity. We cannot be certain that human ingenuity does not contain limits or perhaps seeds of self-destruction. The ultimate comprehension of the universe in the fullness of its dimensions—in all that composes it, in its dynamics, and its infinite time-space extent from the micro to the macro cosmic, may be beyond the comprehension of the human mind. Learning to comprehend and to live with the concept of the ultimate environment may be one of the greater challenges to the integrity of human society.

III. Criteria for Decisions

Criteria for the soundness of environmental decisions have become a major point of controversy between so-called environmentalists and opponents of environmental restrictions and regulations, chiefly among self-styled conservatives and libertarians. A frequent claim by the conservative opposition is that alleged threats to the environment are imaginary—are in fact “liberal propaganda” based on junk science and without foundation in sound science. Although a majority of competent scientists may support a particular theory (e.g., the prospect of global climate change) a small number of contrarian scientists are cited to refute majority opinion. And so the news media and “fence sitting” politicians are able to say that “some scientists say this and some say that and until they agree there is no justification for public action.”

Environmental education in the schools has also come under attack. Teachers and textbooks have been accused of “green washing” the students, putting them at odds with the environmental orientation of their parents and prejudicing them against the performance of the American economy. Critics of environmental education allege

that schools are neglecting sound science and mathematics for liberal claptrap and propaganda disguised as ecology. There are obvious differences, not equally valid, over the criteria by which the soundness of environmental decisions can be determined. For economic utilitarians, cost-benefit analysis with emphasis on jobs, profits, growth, and taxes offer the soundest criteria for environmental decision making. Fundamental economics are relevant to environmental decisions, but contemporary, laissez faire, market-oriented economics fail to take account of the environmental basis of all human activity.

There is little disagreement that environmental decisions should be based on the most reliable science. Disagreements are largely over what science is most reliable and as noted, some of them are covert attacks upon “environmentalism.” Moreover, opinion studies indicate that a large percentage of Americans have an ambivalent attitude toward science. Especially among the less educated, conventional “common sense” takes precedence over scientific theory which is often difficult to comprehend and more often posits probabilities, unlike the old time religion and the law which mandated positive “yes or no” answers. In summary, it seems apparent that how people judge the soundness of an environmental decision depends upon their criteria for judgment, and these criteria are derived from their personal and ideational orientation toward the world which may be, but more often is not, understood as a complex, dynamic, total system, evolving throughout time.

IV. Institutions

Social decisions are formulated and expressed through a complex public-private institutional context which, although subject to change, tends to resist change. Institutional stability is a necessary condition of societal stability. Yet institutional rigidities may retard adaptation to environmental change and obstruct the foresight needed for timely response to emerging environmental threats. To some degree on almost any public issue the institutional context contains indeterminate and controversial elements. This is a “normal” condition of

democratic politics. And so the process of policy formation through institutions for confirming social decisions toward government action are often characterized by competition, conflict, compromise, and uncertainty of outcome. These circumstances might be alleviated to the extent that there were agreed criteria for sound decision making and the necessity for environmental decision.

In recent decades, efforts to achieve consensus on divisive proposals and issues have often been undertaken through conflict resolution or mediation. Mediation is now playing a growing role in social decision making. It provides an opportunity to sort out and evaluate allegations regarding the reliability or soundness of evidence regarding an environmental controversy, and a factual basis for estimating the consequences of alternative decisions. The estimates are possibilities or probabilities, seldom predictions.

The environmental public decisions affecting all society are confirmed or formalized through government. The processes of election to office, referenda, political goal setting, negotiation, legislation, and adjudication of controversies through the courts, are institutional arrangements for making and legitimating the nearest approximation to *de jure* societal decision making. Not all decisions representing societal consensus reflect unanimous opinion. There is always the possibility of indifference or dissent, even if no more than numerically minuscule.

There is, however, a new and growing institutional structure through which environment-affecting decisions are made. This is the non-governmental economic sector of business corporations, especially large multinational-national corporations having material assets and economic powers exceeding those of all but the largest and most effectively governed national states. In the so-called less developed countries—notably in mining, timbering, manufacturing, agricultural production, and building construction—transnational firms, in cooperation or collusion with local political power-holders may influence the political

economy of these states to the benefit of foreign investors and pre-determine the environmental future of their people. In these countries there is no real societal decision making and environmental considerations are repressed when in conflict with political-economic power holders.

Not many Americans readily see how environment-impacting events abroad affect interest in the United States. But the globalizing of trade and communication, competition between governments and corporations for access to material and labor resources, and the movements of populations disrupted by civil violence and environmental disaster, ultimately affect American society in many ways. Moreover this nation is now party to numerous international treaties and other agreements that either modify traditional sovereignty (e.g., General Agreement in Tariffs and Trade) or would place upon the nation obligations affecting domestic uses of energy (e.g., Kyoto Agreements on Climate Change). In a relatively shrinking and interconnecting world, actions anywhere significantly degrading or depleting natural resources and the biosphere have the potential of harming nations everywhere—the United States included. And so American society, or at least its federal government, must deal with transboundary issues for which the nation has few precedents, with those it does have largely confined to Canada and Mexico (e.g., boundary waters), or to international common spaces (e.g., open oceans and Antarctica).

How far may we expect American society to agree to modifying personal life-styles and expectations in conformity with international commitments? Conservative opinion rejects any infringement of traditional liberties and national sovereignty. Adherents to *laissez-faire* free enterprise oppose a large number of domestic environmental prohibitions and regulations that allegedly burden or restrict commerce. Conversely, environmentalists oppose free-trade agreements that nullify domestic environmental policies. Proposals to establish a federal program for the analysis of trends relating to population, environment, and resources have been rejected in the US congress on

the allegation that such inquiry would be a precedent for centralized national (i.e., socialist) planning. In contrast, economic trend analysis has strong congressional support, but the trends are narrowly defined, focused chiefly on economic growth.

In the lexicon of the far right, the custody and care of the environment, as with many other social issues, is best left to decisions made in the market place. It contends that the invisible neutral hand of economic forces provides a more reliable guide to a future of growth and prosperity than are the inevitably corrupting processes of political government. Ayn Rand, who might be described as high priestess of the “virtue of selfishness” and prophetess of the cult of “greed is good,” would confine government to three basic functions in a nation consisting of an aggregation of free acting individuals, and in which society *per se* is a philosophic abstraction.

She writes that:

The proper functions of a government fall into three broad categories, all of them involving the issues of physical force and the protection of men's rights: the police, to protect men from criminals—the armed services, to protect men from foreign invaders—the law courts, to settle disputes among men according to objective laws. These three categories involve many corollary and derivative issues—and their implementation in practice, in the form of specific legislation, is enormously complex. It belongs to the field of a special science: the philosophy of law. Many errors and many disagreements are possible in the field of implementation, but what is essential here is the principle to be implemented: the principle that the purpose of law and of government is the protection of individual rights. (*The Virtue of Selfishness*, 1961, p. 131)

The ability of any individual to single-handedly defend rights is obviously limited—hence governments. Ayn Rand recognizes that the implementation of rights is enormously complex. Governments are instituted to defend rights—but these rights, as history shows, have often been those of a small minority of power holders. To the extent that government serves an entire society—or the greater part of it—

social decisions may adopt and institute many functions beyond protection of individual rights—at least this has been a pervasive reality of accountable government. Yet freedom from environmental hazards and life in a healthful environment have been proposed as fundamental human rights confirmed by statutory law or constitutional amendment.

Rights detached from responsibilities readily degenerate into irresponsibility—license. The ability of a society to achieve consensus on environmental issues and through its institutional processes to make sound environmental decisions requires a responsible regard for the human species and for the natural systems upon which its survival and all systems of the biosphere depend. I conclude that if humanity self-destructs through denial of the require-

ments for survival on the earth it will not be for want of available knowledge of those requirements. But survival in the world bequeathed by the 20th century requires a far-ranging and relatively rapid process of social learning. In this task, political and educational leadership is essential. The horizons of knowledge must be expanded to discover what we may not now know, but need to know, so that we may cope with the dangers and risks that our human ingenuity has inadvertently created.

Can society make sound environmental decisions? Of this we cannot be certain, there are formidable obstacles to consensus. But we can take measures toward assuring that the answer to this and its collateral questions lead to the result which we prefer. The challenge to this conference, and to others like it, is to discover the route to a sustain-

able future of desired quality and equity. This task requires an interchange of information and ideas, and an unbiased assessment of the most reliable evidence available. It is a task of learning by individuals aggregating to the entire society. The moral of an old Chinese proverb is that if you persist in the course that you have taken you will end up where you have headed. The course of wisdom now is to ascertain as best we may from the most reliable evidence available, the probable destination of the course toward which we are in fact headed and to project the most probable route toward a destination optimal for the preservation of life on earth.

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