

trash-burning incinerators, the federal government could readily require that its installations dispose of their trash through such recycling. This would immediately create great demand for materials-recovery facilities and compost plants, converting a now-minuscule industry into one sufficiently large to come knocking on the doors of the country's cities and towns for their trash disposal business. In the same way, if purchase orders specified that fruit and vegetables for government cafeterias had to be organically grown, the transformation of agriculture would be greatly stimulated.

In the short term such market mechanisms make a certain amount of sense. But they are only reactions to years of destructive experience. They will not protect us from new mistakes. The evolution of technology will continue, and left to their own profit-maximizing devices, future capitalists will make new environmental mistakes. The prospect of enduring them for a generation or so before the ecological faults are detected and the production processes responsible for them are gradually defeated in the marketplace is an unacceptable answer to the ongoing war between the eco-sphere and the technosphere. In making decisions that govern production technology, only social intervention in this now-private province makes sense.

If private governance of production—the characteristic feature of capitalism—is at fault, what can account for the horrendous levels of pollution in socialist countries, where production decisions have presumably been under social control? One reason, of course, is that environmental advocates have, until recently, not been free to comment on, let alone influence, government decisions. Another reason is that most of the systems of production adopted by the socialist countries—for example, chemical agriculture, nuclear power and petrochemical manufacturing—were developed in capitalist countries, where their design was governed by short-term profit maximization, to the exclusion of environmental and other social concerns.

Thus, social governance of production has failed to materialize in either capitalist or socialist countries. What is called for is the extension of democracy into the arena in which production decisions are made. In the United States, that means the corporate board room, and the appointment of a token environmentalist will not do. Is this an illusory goal? Recent history urges an answer, reminding us that the

democratic impulse—which fueled the civil rights movement in the United States and the upheavals in Eastern Europe—can be translated into profound change. If that impulse has broken through the Berlin wall, surely it can find a way to open the door to the corporate board room. The environmental experience points the way; now it is time to learn how to traverse this historic passage. □

## THE CUTTING EDGE

# The Trouble With Earth Day

KIRKPATRICK SALE

**I** imagine that a small child with many bruises is brought into a doctor's office and the physician is told that she has been repeatedly beaten. The first question to be asked is surely, Where does it hurt? with an inspection and remedies to follow. But it would be only the most callous and unethical doctor who would refrain from asking a series of other questions: How did it happen? Who did it? When? How long has this been going on? Why? How can we prevent it from happening again?

Imagine, then, that a society understands it is suffering from multiple environmental assaults of great seriousness. The first question it would ask itself is surely, Where does it hurt? and, assuming it to be a rational society, it would order an inspection and provide remedies, and swiftly and efficiently, too. But it would be only the most insensitive and basically self-destructive society that would refrain from asking a similar series of subsequent questions—in particular, Who did it? Where? Why? How can we prevent it from happening again?

In general the environmental organizations in this country and the official agencies that have grown up in response to them have not, over the past two decades, gotten beyond the most elemental Where-does-it-hurt? questions; certainly they have not raised the deeper, subsequent questions or demanded the still deeper answers. Earth Day 1990, I regret to say, for all its ballyhoo and good intentions, has moved not one step out of that mire.

Earth Day 1990, the principal organization behind this month's Earth Week, April 16–22, does ask, Where does it hurt? often and loudly, and its answers are the by-now-familiar litany: global warming, ozone depletion, deforestation, overpopulation, pollution of air and water, toxic waste, nuclear energy, overflowing landfills, resource depletion, acid rain, chemical poisoning. And it forthrightly confronts the question of how to fix those problems. On that basis it has set up a \$3 million operation with a national

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headquarters, fifteen regional offices, an agenda of 3,000 events and an occasion that will bring more crowds, media attention, political hype, celebrities and T-shirt sellers to environmental issues than any other in the nation's history.

But it is an operation—however well meaning, however many good people involved—that is, at its core, a shuck. For after telling us where it hurts, it gives us only the most simplistic sorts of remedies. Its first is personal “life-style” Band-Aids for hemorrhaging wounds and do-it-yourself surgery; its second is the nostrum of federal laws and regulations, providing the patient with more of the kind of cures that created the disease. And it never gets around to asking—much less proposing answers for—those fundamental questions this society must be forced to face: Who, really, is causing the degradation and destruction of the environment? How can they be stopped, and stopped short, not just “regulated” and “overseen” and reformed? Why has society allowed this to go on, to the point that all oxygen-dependent species, including humans, are imperiled, and why do we seem powerless to prevent it? What would it take to accomplish the serious, wrenching, full-scale readjustments that in fact are necessary to save the earth, including reduced standards of living, consumption and growth; severe population reduction; and a new, modest, regardful relationship with the earth and its species? Who is going to carry this literally vital message to the American people? And *when*? For the time, as every new crisis lets us know, is later than we think.

Let me be specific. Earth Day has four fundamental problems that to me seem to undermine its chance to create effective change and in some ways threaten to make it counterproductive.

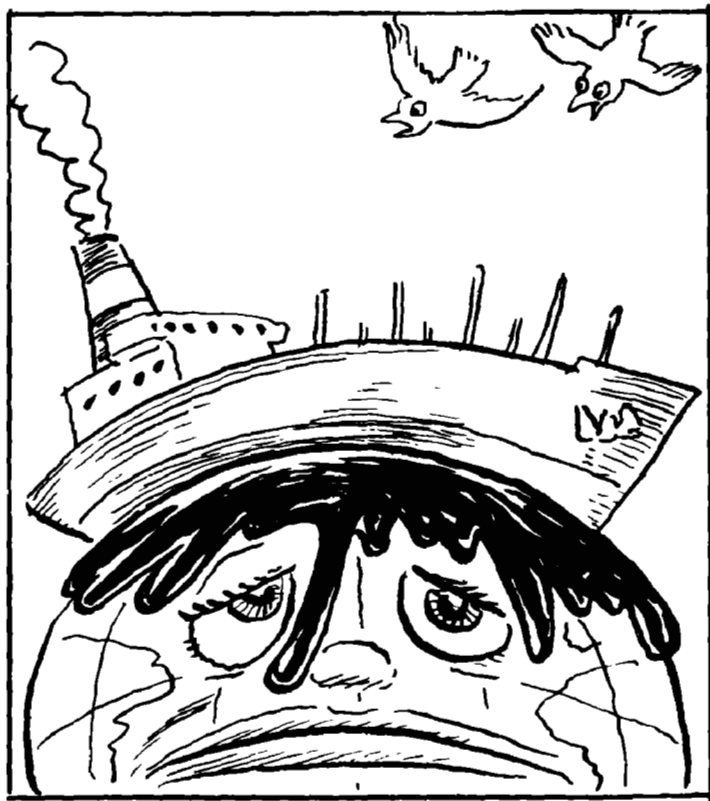
First, like the rowdydow of books and articles over the past year since *Time*'s Planet-of-the-Year klaxon call, Earth Day's primary emphasis is on individual responses: “what *you* can do” to stop ozone depletion or rain forest destruction. This hints-from-Heloise approach (actually Heloise *does* have a book coming out on how you can save the world right in your kitchen) is, not to put too fine a point on it, asinine. According to the Earth Day “fact sheets,” what “*you*” are supposed to do about ozone depletion is “immediately repair any leaks in your refrigerator,” “consider alternatives to rigid foam insulation” and the like; about acid rain, “cut down on your energy consumption” and “write letters to members of Congress”; about global warming, “cut down on your energy consumption” and “promote family planning”; about rain forest destruction, “avoid eating fast-food hamburgers” and “organize and attend rain forest benefits”; and so on. “Earth Day 1990,” its literature proclaims, “is rooted in a belief that people—individually and collectively—do indeed count” and that “the environmental crisis . . . is not beyond our care and control.”

Look, I am as responsible as most eco-citizens: I bike everywhere; I don't own a car; I recycle newspapers, bottles, cans and plastics; I have a vegetable garden in the summer; I buy organic products; and I put all vegetable waste into my backyard compost bin, probably the only one in all of

Greenwich Village. But I don't at the same time believe that I am saving the planet, or in fact doing anything of much consequence about the various eco-crises around us. What's more, I don't even believe that if “all of us” as individuals started doing the same it would make any but the slightest difference, and then only of degree and not—where it counts—of kind.

Leave aside ozone depletion and rain forest destruction—those are patently corporate crimes that no individual actions will remedy to any degree. Take, instead, energy consumption in this country. In 1987 (the most recent figures) residential consumption was 7.2 percent of the total, commercial 5.5 percent and industrial 23.3 percent; of the remainder, 27.8 percent was transportation (about one-third of it by private car) and 36.3 percent was electric generation (about one-third for residential use). Individual energy use, in sum, was something like 28 percent of total consumption. Therefore, although you and I cutting down on energy consumption would have some small effect (and should be done), it is surely the energy consumption of industry and other large institutions such as government and agribusiness that needs to be addressed first. And it is industry and government that must be forced to explain what their consumption is for, what is produced by it, how necessary it is and how it can be drastically reduced. They need an Earth Day more than we do.

The point is that the ecological crisis *is* essentially beyond “our” control, as citizens or householders or consumers or even voters. It is not something that can be halted by recycling or double-pane insulation. It is the inevitable by-product of our modern industrial civilization, dominated by capitalist production and consumption and serviced and protected by various institutions of government, federal to local.



It cannot possibly be altered or reversed by simple individual actions, even by the actions of the millions who will take part in Earth Day—and even if they all went home and fixed their refrigerators and from then on walked to work. Nothing less than a drastic overhaul of this civilization and an abandonment of its ingrained gods—progress, growth, exploitation, technology, materialism, humanism and power—will do anything substantial to halt our path to environmental destruction, and it's hard to see how the life-style solutions offered by Earth Day will have an effect on that.

What I find truly pernicious about such solutions is that they get people thinking they are actually making a difference and doing their part to halt the destruction of the earth: "There, I've taken all the bottles to the recycling center and used my string bag at the grocery store; I guess that'll take care of global warming." It is the kind of thing that diverts people from the hard truths and hard choices and hard actions, from the recognition that they have to take on the larger forces of society—corporate and governmental—where true power, and true destructiveness, lie.

And to the argument that, well, you have to start somewhere to raise people's consciousness, I would reply that this individualistic approach does not in fact raise consciousness. It does not move people beyond their old familiar liberal perceptions of the world, it does nothing to challenge the belief in technofix or write-your-Congressperson solutions and it does not begin to provide them with the new vocabulary and modes of thought necessary for a true change of consciousness. We need, for example, to think of recycling centers not as the answer to our waste problems, as Earth Day suggests, but as a confession that the system of packaging and production in this society is out of control. Recycling centers are like hospitals; they are the institutions at the end of the cycle that take care of problems that would never exist if ecological criteria had operated at the beginning of the cycle. Until we have those kinds of understandings, we will not do anything with consciousness except reinforce it with the same misguided ideas that created the crisis.

Second, Earth Day is designed to be a weeklong media bash and not a long-range grass-roots campaign with a clear and continuing political thrust. It is founded on the assumption, challengeable at best, that it was Earth Day 1970 that was responsible for the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency, passage of the Clean Water and Clean Air acts and perhaps public support for environmental lobbies in Washington. So this time around the operating theory is that all you have to do is imitate the original event but make it bigger and you will automatically create, in the words of Earth Day 1990 chair Denis Hayes, "a citizens' army" for a "Decade of the Environment" and

thus the constituency to force "a worldwide ban on chloro-fluorocarbons by 1995," an 85 percent reduction in fossil fuel use by 2015 and an 80 percent reduction in acid rain.

There's nothing wrong with those goals, but why anyone would imagine that they could acquire a strong and active constituency as a result of a week of media-filtered eco-hype is somewhat puzzling. But this is the Earth Day strategy. Most of the \$3 million the organization is raising nationally and the \$1 million or so being raised locally is going to be spent on the events of Earth Week, culminating in the big marches and rallies of Earth Day. Very little is being devoted to building up a door-to-door outreach campaign that might take the movement beyond the already converted; very little to knitting existing neighborhood, watchdog and environmental groups into a political network; and nothing at all, as far as I can tell, on the establishment of an organization for the continuing battle after the Earth Day tents are folded up on April 23.

Then too, the assumption behind Earth Day politics—when it is political at all—is that passing laws works to protect the environment. "We expect the world's governments," Hayes says, "to . . . actively begin addressing the wide array of urgent, important problems facing the planet." Well, in some cases passing laws can make a marginal difference, if the laws are tough, clear and easily enforceable—such as the ban on DDT (though it did not halt production of DDT entirely or its use overseas). But anyone who has studied the effect of the Clean Water and Clean Air acts in the past two decades cannot argue that they have been notably successful; anyone who has seen the miserable failure of the Superfund cleanups cannot assume that federal financing is effective; anyone who has watched the generally bumbling and bureaucratic processes of the E.P.A. cannot have a lot of confidence in its ability to control pollution, even when ordered to do so, in any serious way. Perhaps this legalistic strategy stems from the fact that so many of the people running Earth Day on the national level are lawyers, and that so many on its national board are politicians and lobbyists, but it's pretty late in the day to think that Congress or the E.P.A. is the place to go for environmental change.

I do think it would be possible to take \$3 million and unlimited publicity and create an effective and tough-minded movement to identify the eco-criminals in our midst and work to put a stop to them, even to build support for the elements of an ecologically based society that would not permit such criminals to exist. But that takes time, commitment and a clear sense of values and goals, and Earth Day 1990 does not have enough of any of those. It's going in for the one-time splash, and that's unfortunate.

Third, I believe it is a fundamental tactical as well as philosophical error for the people working for substantial environmental transformation to make common cause with the very forces that are responsible for the eco-crisis in the first place or that are entirely wrapped up in the present lobbyist-lawyer-consultant-legislator-bureaucrat establishment that perpetuates it. This applies to corporations, of course, and to government agencies at all levels, but it applies

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also to the political and environmental do-goos who try to picture themselves as cleaner and greener than thou.

To their credit, the Earth Day organizers have not simply raised money from any corporation hoping to buy a good environmental image; they have also insisted that the sponsors show "some specific pro-environmental change in corporate behavior" and "an ongoing commitment to dialogue . . . with environmental advocates." The organizers have made explicit their commitment to the Valdez Principles promulgated last year by environmentalists, which are supposed to make corporations "conduct their business as responsible stewards of the environment and seek profits only in a manner that leaves the earth healthy and safe." Yet they have also gone after big corporations and wealthy individuals with great avidity—among the sponsors are Esprit, Church & Dwight, Shaklee and Coca-Cola—and they've put on their national board the heads of a dozen corporations and the likes of Ted Turner, Laurance Rockefeller, Vidal Sassoon and Jann Wenner. And they seem totally blind to the elemental ecological truth that, at bottom, the modern industrial economy is antithetical to ecological harmony; or, as Jeremy Seabrook has put it, "If it had been the purpose of human activity on earth to bring the planet to the edge of ruin, no more efficient mechanism could have been invented than the market economy."

The opportunity exists, twenty years after the first Earth Day and twenty-eight years after the publication of *Silent Spring*, to raise some substantial questions about the nature of our industrial society: Who is producing the poisons of the field, who is cutting down the rain forests, who is causing acid rain, and why? But that would mean pointing fingers not only at conglomerate America but at the culture that sustains it, and this the Earth Day organizers cannot bring themselves to do, even if they had insight enough to recognize the problem.

It is the same undemanding willingness of Earth Day 1990 to work with those who will work with it that has allowed so many politicians and admen and media moguls and environmental do-goos to jump on its careening bandwagon. Already the national board is heavily laden with such types, and Earth Day itself will bring out still more, all nudging for a place in the limelight and a seal of good earthkeeping. But just to show how risky a business this is, let's look at one man who graces the national board, Senator George Mitchell: He's the fellow who only recently showed his colors again when he worked so hard to gut President Bush's already fatuous "clean air" bill, arranging a behind-the-scenes deal that could not have delighted the auto companies and the electric utilities more.

Perhaps more disturbing, though, is the way that the organizers have let the environmental lobbies swarm around Earth Day like fish in a feeding frenzy. These are not sinister organizations, of course, but inevitably, doing what they do, they are accomplices in the basically sham process of environmental protection run out of Washington and in the political structure that supports it. They foster the idea that environmental politics consists in passing laws in Washington, that it is the work of specialists and experts and that it

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does not have anything to do with economic concentration, market forces, control of resources, community disfranchisement or ecological blindness. And their notion of strategy, not by accident similar to Earth Day 1990's, is to press for life-style changes on the one hand and send in a "generous tax-deductible Citizen Sponsor contribution" on the other. It is time to leave those lobby professionals behind; time to move on.

**F**inally, and to me most distressing, the organizers and sponsors of Earth Day at all levels seem to have no awareness of any other endangered species than the human, any other crises than those that threaten human comfort and consumption. In all the Earth Day literature—and it is copious; let's not even think of the number of trees felled—I have found only two or three halfhearted phrases, like "help preserve wetland habitat" and "water diversion often leads to destruction of wildlife," that move beyond a single-minded anthropocentrism. Most of it is unembarrassedly about "the peril to our species" and the need for "public safety and human dignity" and suchlike.

Each day of Earth Week, for example, has been given over to a separate environmental issue. They are, in order, energy efficiency, recycling, water conservation, alternative transportation, toxin information and outdoor recreation. Each one, as you can see, is wholly concerned with human problems, human systems, human safety and basically how (American) humans can go on living at the same material level over the long haul without messing things up for themselves. Nowhere on that list is there any consideration of what are thought to be animals' (or trees' or rivers') rights; nowhere any regard for the ongoing extinction of species caused by humans; nowhere a concern for the countless other species that are being threatened daily by the destruction and poisoning of habitats; nowhere any thought given to the restoration of the natural systems of the living earth and learning to live in them as the first people did. Above all, nowhere on the list is there found any consideration of wilderness, of the need for a healthy earth to have places where humans don't intervene, where the full complexity and diversity of life are allowed to flourish unimpeded. All that the Earth Day people can see is something called—just think of the implications—"outdoors," and all they can think of doing there is human "recreation."

The reason this is important is that until the human understands itself as a species—"reapplies for membership in the biosphere," as the eco-historian Thomas Berry has put it—it will never stop treating the earth and its treasures ("resources") as the rightful food for its omnivorous maw, will never stop acting as if it owns the earth and has the right

of "dominion over" its species. This is not a matter of passing laws or double-paning windows; this is a deep reordering of values, a new (and very old) way of understanding the earth and its species as sacred, an ecological consciousness that goes right to the heart of our lives. Without it no profound changes will come, or last.

It was perhaps unrealistic of me to have expected that even such a clearheaded fellow as Denis Hayes would have come to embrace the very challenging concept of biocentrism (or ecocentrism, if you will) for Earth Day, or that, if he had, he would have been able to make it understood by the likes of Ted Turner and George Mitchell, not to mention the innumerable directors and staff members around the country. But Earth Day's overwhelming concentration on human peril and human survival still came as a bit of a surprise to me, I must admit, and a disappointment. (Could the reason for this failure have something to do with the fact that only 17 percent of Earth Day 1990's national board are women, who are traditionally more sensitive here?) It shows what a long way we have to go before we achieve that essential alteration of values and perceptions that must come before we begin the work of transforming our civilization from the industrial to the ecological.

However, I do not despair of Earth Day entirely. I belong to three organizations that will be taking part in activities of one kind or another in New York City; I will be participating in a couple of forums and giving a talk during Earth Week; and I will get up early on Sunday to travel out to the middle of Pennsylvania to give another talk on Earth Day itself. It is obviously a time when at least some part of the population will wish to hear messages about the earth, and they need not all be shallow and individualistic.

In short, we must make of Earth Day what we can. Many I know will take the opportunity to criticize, in a friendly fashion, and to educate when and where they can. Many will regard it as an occasion to organize and recruit for one righteous cause or another. And many will treat it merely as day one of a campaign to carry on with the spirit of Earth Day (or their version of Earth Day) in a more concerted and farseeing way. David Levine, for example, who is the director of an activist education program in New York called the Learning Alliance, has put it this way:

"Earth Day isn't all that we wanted it to be, but we don't see it as the end of this job of saving the earth; it's the beginning. Some of us are going to use the energy that it's created, the new people it's brought in and the new alliances we've made, and build on that for the future. This is the *decade* of the environment. Remember, we've got ten years to put into practice the lessons we learn from this Earth Day, and we'll make it better next time, and we'll keep up the pressure everywhere. Come Earth Day 2000, maybe we can even celebrate."

Perhaps; it is to be hoped. But we had best use this occasion to start asking the right questions. One day devoted to Where-does-it-hurt? is all right, but only if it leads to Who? and Why? and How often? and above all, What will it take to stop it? Those are questions that we have to begin asking ourselves and the politicians, lobbyists, C.E.O.s and powers-that-be in every dimension of our lives. □

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