

America is ready to be a leader in sustainability

Johannesburg, South Africa, is going to be an exciting place to be between August 26 and September 4. World leaders, concerned citizens, international agencies, and other major actors are gathering there to give a status report on how the world has fared in the ten years since the first "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro. Then the UN sponsored World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) will make plans for the next decade. Americans will be acting in the forefront of these moves, but the US government must make an about-face, if it wants to lead the movement.

Americans provide innovative solutions

Concerned and innovative Americans have played an important part in studying the world's environmental problems and creating technological solutions in the fields of energy and water conservation, organic farming, medicine and many others.

Unfortunately, our government has preferred to drag its heels instead of taking the lead that many American citizens have prepared for it. By listening to influential businessmen, the government has opted for the status quo, preferring to sit on the sidelines during the most important battle to be waged in our time. The WSSD provides an opportunity for the USA to take up its natural role as leader, in environmental matters as in other areas, supported by the combined efforts of its citizens.

Climate

Most scientists agree that emissions of the so-called greenhouse gases, such as CO₂, are a major cause of the climatic changes that have become more and more obvious. The U.N. climate panel has indicated that a reduction of 60-80 percent in CO₂ emissions is necessary to bring about climate stabilization. The Rio Summit advised initial reductions in CO₂ to 6-8 percent below 1990 levels in industrial nations. At the time this appeared feasible if all parties would work together.

The past 10 years have been extremely disappointing in this respect, even though technology exists to meet the requirements. Instead, CO₂ emissions have increased globally by 9 percent between 1992 and 2001, with the U.S. responsible for a horrendous 18 percent increase.

Nevertheless, Americans have been in the forefront in the development of alternative energy technologies: wind and solar power, cleaner burning gas engines, fuel cells and hybrid cars, to name a few. Even big business has discovered that there is big money in the field. The only part of Enron that remained relatively unscathed was its Wind division, which has now been bought by GE. Ford has a hybrid SUV planned for release in December of this year. In many states, consumers are paying extra for "green" energy. California recently passed a bill requiring energy efficiency in all vehicles from 2009. Los Angeles is installing solar panels on many public buildings.

What can we do now?

Although the technology is available, voluntary efforts will probably not be sufficient without specific government initiatives. These can be requirements that all new construction, appliances, machines and vehicles have very low energy usage, as well as education and financial incentives to businesses and private families to decrease their energy needs.

Water

Southern California mirrors water needs world-wide. Our cities wouldn't exist without water brought over great distances from other parts of the West, using dams, reservoirs, tunnels and pipelines to irrigate what is actually desert. Although the area was settled because of apparent sufficient natural water supplies, our water has long come from the Sierras and the Colorado River, to the detriment of areas that are fed naturally from these sources. Still we use water as if we have a God-given right to it. Looking at many Southern California neighborhoods, you would think we are located in the tropics, not a desert. Whereas eastern cities with far better water supplies limit watering to a few hours every other day during drought periods much like normal California weather, we water our lawns – and the roadways - rain or shine, day and night.

What can we do now?

Integrated water management emphasizes increasing water efficiency to ensure that the supplies we have are adequate for everyone. More sustainable farming (and lawn-care) methods prevent the pollution of ground water with toxic chemicals. Among other things, we can learn to landscape with drought-resistant plants, rather than tropical flowers, install appliances and toilets that use less water, and drip-watering adjusted to plant needs. Governments can promote water management by increasing the price of water through taxes, demonstrating that water is not a right, but a precious resource. The income can be applied to subsidize water-management improvements.

Food

Malnutrition among the poor and poor nutrition in developed countries are major world problems. Although the world has the technological means to support its population, the distribution of food resources is inadequate and inefficient. Furthermore, the technology that has produced greater food resources has proved to be both ecologically and socially destructive. Since 1950, the use of chemical fertilizer and pesticides has increased more than 10-fold. While chemicals may initially produce larger crops, they pollute the soil and groundwater and are harmful to the health of both farm workers and consumers. Farmers rely more and more on expensive chemicals, abandoning the sustainable methods appropriate for their environment. This causes a vicious circle of rural poverty, soil and forest depletion, and groundwater pollution.

Two indicators illustrate the vast problems caused by unsustainable practices. Human breast milk is now among the most contaminated foods on Earth. Fish, the major source of nutrition for millions of people, are contaminated by, among other chemicals, mercury, from fossil fuel burning, waste disposal, mining, and other industrial practices.

Americans have long been in the forefront with organic farming methods, which have been shown to be able to produce sufficient food resources while restoring the soil. A recent article in *TIME* reported that organic products are being recognized as viable business as well.

What can we do now?

As consumers we can encourage our supermarkets to stock sustainably produced foods. Governments can require better control over fertilizer and pesticide use, while promoting sustainable methods. Chemicals must be priced – through taxing – to reflect their impact on the environment.

Materials and waste

Global consumption of metals, minerals, wood, plastic, and other materials more than doubled between 1960 and 1995 and Americans are responsible for the greater part of it. If the entire world consumed these products at the same rate as we do, the Earth would soon be depleted. The computer industry is the most chemically intense in the world, using 500-1,000 different chemicals, many of them highly toxic, including arsenic, cadmium, lead, and mercury. Electronic and computer wastes are growing faster than any other type of hazardous waste.

Fortunately, researchers and practical innovators have discovered that much of our wastes can actually be recycled into new products. Designers are building recycling into products by using fewer and more appropriate materials. Some European countries require manufacturers of, among other things, cars and electronic products to be responsible for the disposal of their products, which has encouraged them to rethink materials usage and reuse.

Although recycling rates have increased for household disposables, they have stagnated at 30-50 percent in industrial countries. Despite recycling efforts, total materials use and extraction of virgin materials continue to climb.

What can we do now?

Governments must require recycling of wastes and encourage manufacturers to consider “cradle-to-grave” life-cycles in order to design sustainability into their products.

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The US government should have no qualms about supporting even radical solutions to sustainability. Americans are ready and willing to do their part.

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August 8, 2002