

## *IT's TIME TO TAKE OFF THE BLINKERS*

It is time to take off the blinkers – time to wake up to the massive scale and intensity of humankind's activities on our planet.

The great surge in the number of people on Earth and the explosive intensification of resource and energy use and waste production are causing serious damage to the planet's ecosystems. Business as usual will mean the ecological collapse of our society.

Some prominent scientists have recently expressed the view that it is too late, and that we are heading for the end of civilisation – and possibly the extinction of the human species. But perhaps it is not too late.

Climate change is at present the most critical issue; but this is just one symptom of humankind's gross over-exploitation of the Earth's natural resources and the general insensitivity to the needs of the processes of life that underpin our existence. There are many other areas for serious concern, including:

- Worldwide loss of biodiversity – on land and in the oceans
- Severe forms of land degradation, involving large scale deforestation, biological impoverishment of soil, disruption of nutrient cycles and salinisation
- Thinning of the ozone layer
- Global pollution with persistent organic pollutants
- Acidification of the oceans
- The existence of thousands of weapons of mass destruction
- Hundreds of millions of humans living under conditions of extreme deprivation.

### **Some perspectives**

The human population has increased around 1000 fold since the advent of farming 12000 years ago, putting immense pressures on the food-producing ecosystems of our planet. More than 70% of this increase has occurred over the past century.

Carbon dioxide emissions from human society have increased about 9000 times since farming began– equivalent to the difference in weight of a small apple and a tonne of bricks. Over 90% of this increase has also occurred over the past 80 years.

The following analogy brings home the massive scale and recent intensification of human activities on Earth. Let us suppose that the beginning of farming was 12 hours ago (rather than 12,000 years), and that at that time humans jumped into a vehicle they had invented. The speed of this vehicle is proportional to the total amount of energy used each day by humankind. Energy use is a reasonable indicator of the scale and intensity of human activities on our planet.

This vehicle, then, set off at a speed of 1 km per hour 12 hours ago.

- 4 hours ago it had picked up speed and was travelling at 30 km/hr
- 1 hour ago it was going at 100 km/hr
- 15 minutes ago at 350 km/hr

- 6 minutes ago at 1000 km/hr
- 3 minutes ago at 3000 km/hr
- It is now travelling at around 18 000 km/hr

Visibility is not good – and we, the passengers, don't have a clear view of where we are going. But among us there are some scientists who have made a study of the environment and they are warning that we are heading for a precipice. They are shouting out to us to slam on the brakes and change direction.

But most of us, especially those in charge, are forcing our vehicle to go faster than ever.

**Hope for the future** lies in a rapid transition to a society that is truly in tune with, sensitive to and respectful of the processes of life – a society that is in tune with our own biology and with the living world around us. Let us call it a *biosensitive society*. Biosensitivity will be the guiding principle in all spheres of human activity.

**This will mean big changes including:**

- Swift and drastic reduction in use of fossil fuels.
- Extensive forestation and reforestation worldwide to sequester atmospheric carbon and increase cloud cover.
- Rapid development of clean energy sources.
- A progressive decrease in the consumption of resources and energy in developed countries.
- Effective protection of biodiversity in all regional ecosystems and in the oceans.
- The return of nutrients in organic waste to farmland.
- Maintaining and improving the biological integrity of soils.
- No release into the environment of persistent organic pollutants (POPs) or other harmful chemical compounds.
- Eventual adjustment of global and regional populations to levels that do not cause progressive damage to the planet's ecosystems (1000 million globally?).
- Elimination of all weapons of mass destruction.
- People's lifestyles will satisfy human health needs and will be consistent with the health requirements of the planet's ecosystems. This will mean emphasis on sources of enjoyment that are not environmentally costly, such as growing food, making music, dancing, art, theatre, sport, convivial social interaction – in contrast, for example, to consumerism and fossil fuel dependent travel.
- A shift to an economic system which:
  - is based on economic theory that reflects sound understanding of the processes of life that underpin our existence and of the biological limits to human activities on Earth

- ensures the satisfaction of human health needs at much lower rates of energy and resource use and waste production than those typical of affluent societies today
- does not result in a continuously increasing rate of use of material resources and energy
- progressively reduces current disparities in human wellbeing.
- The transfer of workers in occupations that cause undesirable impacts on the environment to jobs that are consistent with ecological health and sustainability.
- A significant drop in the working hours of the labour force, reducing the intensity of resource and energy use at the same time as reducing unemployment.
- Progressive steps to encourage local self-sufficiency.
- A core theme in educational programs at all levels: the story of life on Earth and of how humans fit into that story.

### **Priorities**

The transition to ecological sustainability will not be possible without strong government action, supported by an informed and concerned electorate.

However, at present the worldview, assumptions and priorities of the dominant culture of our society block any significant move towards sustainability.

There will be no transition unless this culture comes to embrace, at its heart, a basic understanding of the story of life on Earth and the human place in nature and of the major human-induced threats to the biosphere – linked with a unifying vision of an ecologically sustainable, healthy and fair society of the future.

Our first priority must therefore be to bring about such understanding right across the community, especially in the corridors of power.

For more detail see *Our place in nature: past present and future*, published by Nature and Society Forum GPO Box 11, Canberra, ACT, 2601.

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