

**FEATURE ARTICLE:**  
**REGARDING THOSE IN OTHER PLACES, OTHER TIMES**

by A. Rodney Dobell

Elsewhere in this newsletter Professor Steve Lonergan suggests that "the key challenge to a sustainable future is how to attain a more equitable society nationally, internationally, and intergenerationally" (*Ed.: please see page 5*). In this brief note I examine how such an objective might be achieved in principle, and how it might be entrenched in an Earth Charter of the sort to be discussed in Brazil in June and in some social groundrules for stewardship.

A more equitable society demands at least that we in the industrialized nations of the North recognize more clearly and respect more substantially the interests of those who are distant from us in space or in time. The essence of the argument here is that equity amongst nations now is a fundamental prerequisite of sustainability and intergenerational fairness. Our future interests and the interests of future generations demand preservation of requisite biodiversity and natural capital, and pursuit of an environmentally responsible path of economic development throughout the world. The social restraints and social groundrules essential to these goals will only be acceptable, let alone reasonable, in a world of substantially more equitable international --especially North-South -- relationships.

So we consider first how one might negotiate a more equitable global understanding now, and then seek the principles which might guide a more responsible intertemporal development in this more equitable world community.

**THE AMBIGUOUS SEMANTIC CAPSULE  
"SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT"**

The well-known bargain traced out in the astonishingly influential Brundtland Report envisaged obligations on both sides of the North-South divide. The South, with its young and burgeoning populations was to seek a more environmentally responsible development path than that pursued heretofore by the earlier-industrialized North. This would entail measures to reduce the destruction or degradation of the world's ecosystems and resource endowments, and to find more efficient means to meet the needs of growing numbers even as rates of population increase were drastically reduced. On the other side, with smaller and slower-growing populations, however, no less stringent obligations were entailed, in particular to recognize that the continued massive drawdown of the earth's renewable and exhaustible resources associated with the outlandish consumption levels and living standards

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of the presently industrialized North equally is intolerable and unsupportable. In effect, the South is to focus on achieving a more environmentally acceptable investment/industrialization path, and the North a more environmentally benign and socially responsible consumption path.

In the process of wrapping the semantic capsule "sustainable development" around this potentially unpalatable two-sided world-view was born the genteel ploy of emphasizing the growth imperative for consumption in the South and the industrial communities comfortable with "business (much) as usual", while focusing on sustainability for purposes of dealing with the increasingly strident and influential concerns of environmental movements and scientific bodies documenting the possible dangers of global change.

Thus there remains latent much of the old Stockholm debate between environmentalists and industrialists in the North, and between developed nations of the North and developing nations of the South. The latter continue to emphasize that sustainable development is about development, and that continued economic growth continues to be the priority. (India, for example, in its proposals for the UNCED Earth Charter, suggests that the Principles of General Rights and Obligations include the observation that "The right of development is an inalienable human right and therefore the development needs of all developing countries should be treated as a matter of priority.". The Republic of Korea proposed that "Environmental concerns may not be used as a disguised instrument for impeding the development needs of developing countries.") And the evidence continues very clear that the environmental problem is first and foremost the problem of poverty: environmental degradation and economic impoverishment go together.

So do we remain at the same old place, with the same old conflict, simply more clearly understood and articulated? Or does this new world offer some new leverage?

**THE PROPERTY OF THE POOR**

In his provocative and profound book, **On A Hinge Of History**, Ivan Head begins by quoting an observation of John Ruskin, "whereas it has long been known and declared that the poor have no right to the property of the rich, I wish it also to be known and declared that the rich have no right to the property of the poor".

The property of the poor is usually the commons.

And we are entering into a new era of Enclosures movements -- a process of creating new property rights, property

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rights in environmental assets and ecological resources, by restricting access to the global commons.

Old national or political boundaries may no longer have much relevance when the global commons--whether oceans, atmosphere, migratory species, or the gene pool--is at stake. Recognition of this fact may provide for the poor -- the populations of the South--the bargaining leverage with which to make their voice count for something in the reconciliation of environmental and economic concerns. The "property of the poor" -- their stake in the global commons-- can not this time be enclosed or confiscated so readily as previously. The initial distribution of quotas and environmental endowments will be more fiercely bargained in a setting of much more acute awareness of individual rights.

In preparation of a common strategy for the South in the UNCED negotiations and beyond, follow-up activities to the South Commission have set out a few basic propositions, grounded on the central principle that developing nations have a right to adequate environmental space to accommodate their basic development needs.

First, with respect to the convention on climate change, the "fundamental position which the South should seek to have recognized is the right of each human being to have equal access to the world's atmospheric resources...recognition of this basic right would imply, first and foremost, recognition by the North of its enormous environmental debt" (arising from its pre-empting, through industrial activity, access to the absorptive capacity of the biosphere). Those who have followed the work of Michael Grubb on alternative approaches to the initial distribution of rights in any kind of scheme for tradeable emissions permits will appreciate the enormity of this proposition and its implications for the reversal of present resource flows.

The second key proposition is that any negotiation on the preservation of biodiversity should include the development of special property rights systems and appropriate compensation mechanisms for the biological resources provided by the South, as well as mechanisms for access to biotechnologies developed through the use of the genetic resources so provided.

The essential bargaining strategy for the South then is to insist on adequate recognition within negotiations on these two supplementary conventions as the price to be paid in the overall UNCED discussions for developing country agreement to the environmentally responsible development path so fervently desired by the already developed North.

## CONSERVATION/PRESERVATION

With some such understanding about a better contemporary balance in resource flows, one can turn to the question of sustainability and intergenerational equity.

An important starting point has to do with some social groundrules to set aside some portion of natural habitat to be preserved.

David Pearce, in well-known contributions to environmental economics, has emphasized the notion of "natural capital", and the need to assure maintenance of adequate stocks of it in order to preserve requisite biodiversity and the integrity of the natural ecological systems which have been called the "life support systems of the planet". Since it is likely that some of the essential properties of these natural systems are not adequately provided by manufactured capital, and since it is very likely that action to trade away these natural assets will prove irreversible no matter how perfect may be the capital markets of the future, it follows immediately that some of the apparatus of traditional capital theory and of intertemporal optimization based on maximizing discounted present values will be inapplicable and probably misleading as a guide to environmental policies and the pursuit of a healthy ecosystem.

As an alternative we perhaps must go over, as Pearce suggests, to some guidelines on maintenance of an undiminished stock of natural capital.

Margaret Thatcher expresses emphatically a stewardship notion of this sort in her memorable observation that "No generation can claim ownership of the earth -- all we have is a life tenancy with full repairing lease". What we need to do is to spell out the terms of that lease a little more fully. What is an adequate repair? What does it mean to leave the house in as good a condition as we received it?

Evidently precise answers to these questions may be exactly as difficult as the problems of capital measurement we have just left. But perhaps we might meet this challenge of stewardship by going over to some ancient social groundrules, as expressed in two Victorian precepts.

1) "Do not eat into capital" assures attention to the conservation goal and the Brundtland dictum "live off the interest of natural resources".

2) "Do not sell the heirlooms" is a necessary addition to assure the preservation of priceless assets. In an uncertain world, those assets of biodiversity and genetic variation are the heirlooms with whose irreversible loss we must be concerned.

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## CONCLUSIONS ON EQUITY

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Thus Thatcher stewardship and native traditions of "treading softly on this Earth" point in the same direction in the search for sustainability.

### CONCLUSIONS

The point of this note is that there can be no hope of intergenerational equity, or sustainability, unless we come a great deal closer than we are to distributional justice now. That is the strength of the bargaining position of the poor in the UNCED discussions and beyond. That is why we in the developed nations must, in our own self interest, take that position very seriously and promote its goals. Equity within and between nations now gives us some hope of establishing and making stick the social groundrules which assure adequate conservation of resources and preservation of fundamental ecological systems--that is, some hope of passing on unimpaired an appropriate heritage of natural capital. Together these measures give us some hope of a fairer, better, sustainable world--which is the practical, pragmatic, and commonsense goal we all seek and need to see realized.

