

The Great Global Warming Distraction – Take 2

Yes, global warming is a serious environmental threat, but not for the reasons you may believe.



by Richard MacLean

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My first *Competitive Strategy* column (see *EM* July 2007, page 22) led with this same title, sans “Take 2.” Back then, the title alone was enough to trigger a few recipients on my article e-mail distribution list to fire off requests that I stop sending them “spam.” With a title like this, what else could this be besides junk e-mail? No need to read further.

Those brave enough to read beyond the title would have found that I am not a “climate change denier.” Just the opposite. My point was that there was so much attention and controversy surrounding climate change that it was distracting the public, the media, scientists, politicians, and regulatory agencies from numerous other issues just as threatening to human health and the environment, and possibly more urgent.

The recent Climatic Research Unit e-mail hacking incident is just the latest controversy that has distracted everyone’s attention. A Google search on “Climategate,” as it was dubbed, yielded over 3 million hits just one month after the news broke. The newly minted word immediately made its way into Wikipedia’s lexicon. Climategate is, however, symptomatic of an issue much more serious than just dueling scientists. It is a metaphor for a problem as significant as climate change itself.

The Environment Then versus Now

The modern environmental movement began in the 1960s over the controversy surrounding specific chemicals, manufacturing processes, and disposal practices. Resolution required the creation of new legislative and regulatory frameworks, the building of pollution control infrastructures and the creation of management systems to run everything efficiently. These demands were almost exclusively directed at manufacturers, not consumers. In the grand scheme of things, it was relatively inexpensive, readily doable, and created little inconvenience or change in the public’s lifestyle or affluence level.

Not so for environmental concerns today. Issues such as climate change, water resources, topsoil erosion, depleted fisheries, loss of biodiversity, and deforestation are on a massive, global scale. The stakes are orders of magnitude higher and the underlying drivers are related to population growth and affluence, not out-of-control manufacturing facilities. For example, the World Bank suggests that the global economy will expand from \$35 trillion in 2005 to \$72 trillion in 2030, and the United Nations projects the world’s population increasing from 6.8 billion today to 9 billion in 50 years.

With all this growth in population (read: consumers) and affluence (read: consumption), who will get what slice of the earth’s finite resources? Targeting manufacturers to “fix” the environment was easy. Dealing with issues concerning population control and the distribution of wealth are the environmental third rail. What politician, or even “thug dictator,” is willing to tackle both of these head-on? It’s far better to change the subject or focus on the issue or scapegoat du jour. Another meeting may give the illusion that global leaders are united in watching out for the planet, but what will it really accomplish in the time frame necessary to affect real change?

Bjørn Lomborg, author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, ran a series of opinion columns in *The Wall Street Journal* leading up to the Global Climate Summit in December, pointing out more pressing issues such as malaria in undeveloped countries.¹ Such articles fall on deaf ears, since climate change has transcended from science to ideology. Galileo was placed under house arrest; today, we ban the skeptics from peer-reviewed journals. Climate change currently is big business with obvious winners and losers. Everything from research funding to international disputes over resources and money is in play. It may be grabbing headlines, but again, this is just one of the many global environmental concerns.

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Technology is, of course, held out as the trump card in saving the earth's ecosystems. But there are downsides to technology. What surprises, both positive and negative, might bio- and nanotechnologies offer? CFCs were supposed to be the safer refrigerant, that is until the ozone hole grew. And what about the argument that mankind cannot affect a planet, thus there's no need to be concerned about anthropogenic forces creating global effects?

Gregg Easterbrook in his new book, *Sonic Boom—Globalization at Mach Speed*, states that global integration will produce "riches that none of us can imagine." Can we depend on technology advances keeping abreast of the rate of global degradation caused by ever increasing affluence and population? The authors of a recent *Harvard Business Review* article think otherwise, "Even if energy innovations have a lot of potential, they might not be deployable until it's too late. History shows that most of the technology breakthroughs need decades to make it to the mass market."²

Business Gets On Message

Environmentalists were extraordinarily effective in influencing public opinion in the early days of the environmental movement. Until the early 1990s, manufacturers were totally inept in comparison. Not so today. The public is inundated with messages of how new green technologies and products will save the planet. As traditional environmental departments struggle to do more with less, new sustainability vice president positions are being created and staffed with marketing and communications professionals, not engineers and scientists. Organizations such as the Corporate Responsibility Officers Association have recently burst on the scene. Their members are the ones who get the CEO's attention. Companies no longer have environmental problems, they have messaging issues.

Sustainability has been the buzzword that gave us hope that this will all work out well for future generations. Eco-friendly products are big business



today and they are being packaged, marketed, and sold to the public on a grand scale.³ But ask yourself, are these efforts sufficient to accomplish sustainability's objectives of meeting "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"? Can the world spend its way to sustainability as long as the products consumed have eco-friendly labels? I do not think so.

The mainstream media have been oblivious to the true dimensions of what is going on. Typical example: A recent feature story in a national magazine described the melting glaciers in the Himalayas due to climate change and the long-term impact on crop yields in the lower regions. So far, so good. But it also contained the story, "An Epic Journey to the Edge of Space," about Virgin Galactic's space tourism business. Tickets start at \$200,000 and "floating summersaults are allowed." New Mexico state and local governments are attempting to raise \$140 million to subsidize "Spaceport America." Some locals do not like the idea of using tax money to subsidize another business. The environmental impact of rich tourists blasting emissions overhead for a joyride was not addressed. On the page facing this article is a full-page advertisement for "ECO-nomical" and "ECO-logical" "environmentally friendly" printers.⁴ I would think that the energy it took for a single summersault in space would offset all the gains by all of these eco-friendly copiers.

I have seen this same pattern of inconsistencies in much of what gets reported in the broadcast and print media. Controversies and crises are given top billing. The ostensibly politically correct and moral high grounds are staked out. A presumably "balanced approach" is taken with opposing views voiced, but no real perspective provided. Fashionable issues are covered, rather than fresh, in-depth investigatory reporting of even more significant, but less widely known issues. Affluence and consumption are given a pass or described with

breathless enthusiasm leading one to wonder how the reporting process is influenced by advertising revenues. The impact of population growth is generally ignored. The interrelationships are rarely explored to link the individual stories to a broader picture. Critical new research studies get no traction if they are too boring and technical. The word "entertainment" comes to mind.

Bottom Line

The environment today is all about power, control, money, and resources. A recent amusing example: the nonprofit, Save the Earth Foundation, has filed a lawsuit against Honda Motor Co. because it used their trademark phrase "save the earth" in Honda Civic commercials.⁵ Concern over a "silent spring," as set off by Rachel Carson's book of that name, seems quaint in retrospect.

The planet is in serious trouble, and I am certainly not the first to voice such concerns—there have been dozens of reports and books on the subject.⁶ But rarely are all the dots connected among these complex relationships. Again, the public is distracted with sound bites over controversies, or they are inundated with marketing pitches to consume more without guilt, as long as it has an eco-friendly label on the (recyclable) packaging. They do not grasp the folly of the situation.

For those readers who work for clients, companies, agencies, or organizations, now is a good time to step back and take a broader look at what is going on. The mistake would be to focus too narrowly on single issues and not explain to management the true dimensions of the environmental dynamics in play. Ultimately, that is where the competitive issues and opportunities will be. Far too many organizations are following the near-term money, and today it is all about climate change and sustainability as it is currently practiced (i.e., green messaging, marketing and product development). It's time for a more robust strategy. **em**



Dealing with issues concerning population control and the distribution of wealth are the environmental third rail.

References

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