

Analysis and Opinions

In Your Face (Mask)

Environmental degradation starts to affect us — here and now.

By Richard MacLean



What propelled environmental issues to the forefront of public concern from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s?

The problems were in-your-face

and up-your-nose. The contamination of Times Beach and Love Canal, as well as the Cuyahoga River fire, were real-time events to Americans, not theories about environmental degradation. Government and industry responded, and the battle for the environment was won.

Then public interest waned. By 2004, if there were a “state of fear,” according to a book by that name, it was the result of tactics by environmental groups to raise revenue. Even the UN’s Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, which stated that 15 out of 24 ecosystems are being degraded or used unsustainably, was met with public indifference in 2005.

A remarkable shift in attitude began in 2006. No single issue propelled it forward. Katrina was the most obvious, bringing climate change theory to the forefront. Gas prices started rising, adding credibility to Marion King Hubbert’s theory of peak oil production. The world was beginning to grasp the ecological impact of the economic growth in developing nations like China and India.

In rapid-fire fashion, a series of cover stories appeared in national magazines. If you did not have time to read all of this, you could watch the movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*. Green politics is alive again as Democrats point to real and perceived failures in President Bush’s environmental agenda. Companies such as GE and Wal-

Mart are riding this wave of public concern in the form of eco-marketing campaigns.

Will the current interest wane?

I do not think so. We are very likely in the early stages of an environmental movement with more impact than the one that began forty years ago.

True, the ecological degradation that the UN millennium report warns of remains out-of-sight and out-of-mind for most. But as the problems become more and more in-your-face, their magnitude will start to sink in. In developed countries, fish supplies at the market appear stable and reasonably priced. The fish may have unfamiliar names and come from remote regions of the world, but they are there for the eating. Yet the UN report describes a situation of overfishing that will affect future generations.

To scientists, sudden and unexpected shifts are very real; they even have their own term for the phenomenon: a “non-linear event.” This applies to the collapse of fisheries as well as other ecosystem shifts. For example, the journal *Science* recently reported that Greenland’s ice sheet was melting faster than expected. Global warming may be gradual, only a few degrees over centuries, but the ecological impact may be sudden and unpredictable.

Ice-cap melting is just one facet of the problem that few people will ever see firsthand. There are many other seldom-witnessed ecological shifts underway.

I first learned about coral bleaching years ago, but it remained an abstraction. My son is a salt water aquarium hobbyist and, on more than one occasion, I have accompanied him to aquarium stores where he bought so-called “live rock.” To me it did not look alive at all:

dull tan with a hint of purple. Besides, there is not much coral in Arizona, where I live. Who cares?

In July, I had an opportunity to snorkel on the Great Barrier Reef. It was a once-in-a-lifetime event and I chose one of the smaller, more exclusive (read: expensive) diving tours through Silverseries in Cairns, Australia. The full day of diving included a personalized tour by a marine naturalist diver, Marzia Mattioli, trained by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

There, before my eyes, was an ocean filled with my son's "live rock," plus a wonderland of other creatures. As strange as it may seem, what impressed me the most was a small area of coral bleaching pointed out by my guide. What had always looked to me to be lifeless was now very dead for real. The contrast is phenomenal: pure white. She explained correctly that no one can tell for sure what killed this little patch of the reef. She

mentioned climate change and water temperature as a possible factor and that the science is still evolving. The point to this story is that the shift from one state to another can be dramatic. Few people in developed nations will witness these changes directly, but public awareness is growing and environmental concern is back in vogue. Will it remain just a concern or will substantive action be taken? I think it will be the later. The rate of ecological change is so rapid that these issues will continue to be thrust in our face (or in view of our diving masks) again and again.

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