

# Outcries that sky is falling do more harm than good

**Richard MacLean**

CEI director

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Twenty-five years ago, long before being green became fashionable, CEO Gary Hirshberg's innovative business philosophy helped transform his fledgling company, Stonyfield Farm, into the world's largest organic-yogurt corporation, with annual sales exceeding \$300 million.

At a major environmental conference in Boston this past April, Hirshberg gave a moving account of how, early on, he recognized that product purity must be the uncompromised standard in order for his company to be sustainable.



He told the 550 environmental leaders in attendance that he is personally troubled that "200 industrial chemicals have been found in the umbilical cord of babies" and that, "over the past 90 years, we have been conducting a great experiment (in human health), and the early results are not too good."

He delivered this alarming message to a highly receptive audience, but even if he had delivered it to CEOs at a business round-table meeting, his point would have had credibility and impact. First, his performance record holds peer-level respect. Second, the message comes at a tipping point when there is a growing awareness among business executives of the risks of trace toxic chemicals. Finally, it was delivered within context in an even, rational tone.

Contrast this delivery with an April 6 *Viewpoints* article by Guy McPherson, a professor of conservation biology at the University of Arizona. The title alone, "End of the world as we know it," is enough to invoke visions of Chicken Little shouting, "The sky is falling."

A sampler: The "American Empire ... will be well on its way to the post-industrial stone age" after "acquiring oil at the point of a gun ... destroying one culture after another. ... If you are alive in a decade, it will be because you've figured out how to forage locally. The death and suffering will be unimaginable."

Whew!

This commentary is instructional at many levels. First, authority figures are teaching impressionable students by example that this type of rant constitutes rational discourse. The political landscape is already shaped today by party leadership uttering the most extreme vitriol; do not expect much better on the environmental scene. There have always been eco-screamers, but now, it is becoming institutionalized and condoned by our educational system.

Second, eco-alarmist and anti-American clichés may hold sway with left-leaning academicians, but they are a non-starter with any business group and, for that matter, most audiences. If the objective is to influence, educate and change our direction, what do these diatribes accomplish?

From my perspective, they actually do real harm. At the most obvious level, individuals who have the power to effect change positively will be turned off. For those who want to delay or obfuscate environmental initiatives, the really bad actors, disseminating quotes from extremists is an ideal technique to undermine the validity of the underlying issues. A totally unknown holds no currency with the public, but you are much better able to create doubt if you can link that person to a prestigious organization.

The irony in all this is that the core issue described by McPherson is absolutely correct: Energy costs will significantly escalate due to fewer and harder-to-extract supplies (commonly called "Hubbert's Peak"), and will produce widespread economic disruptions. No new revelations or original thinking there.

The problem with his message is threefold: First, there is no credible evidence to support an imminent "fall off the oil-supply cliff" causing us to "abandon the cruise ship of empire" (I am not making this up); second, the ridiculously over-the-top tone; and finally, there is scant mention of mitigating factors such as advances in alternative energy, conservation, oil-shale, coal-gasification and tar-sands technologies.

Indeed, when it comes to the environment, the ultimate end points are often identifiable and bleak. For example, the Earth will burn up in a cataclysmic explosion, but saying it will happen next year is nutty, unless you can back it up with real-time asteroid-impact data.

The challenge has always been to gather enough information to understand how ecosystems, economies and societies will react, respond and adapt. Clearly, the collective "we" have been doing a poor job to date, but the solution is not some shrill message of doom but, instead, one of vision and leadership.

For those individuals who have jobs influencing sophisticated corporate executives, community leaders, government officials and politicians, your challenge to effect change is far greater and more urgent.

My congratulations go out to thought leaders who have the requisite influence skills and do not resort to screaming, "The sky is falling," to get attention.

**The writer is director for the Center for Environmental Innovation, a non-profit, university-based research firm.**