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# CHEMSCOPE

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Company	Air Released	Water Released	Land	Under-ground	Public Sewage	On-site Transfers
De Pont						
Monsanto						
American Cyanamid						
Shell Oil						
BP America						
Freeport McMoan						
AMAX						
Allied Signal						
ASARCO						
Vulcan Chemicals						
General Motors						
Occidental Petroleum						
IM						
Eastman Kodak						
Phelps Dodge						
BASF Corporation						
National Steel						
Inland Steel						
ATOCH						
Hoechst Celanese						
General Electric						
Stirling Chemical						
UNOCAL						
AAC Holdings						
Amex Fibers						
Warraco						
USX						
Chemical						
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# Green Rights for all: the earth view

**Can the opposing demands of North and South ever be reconciled with the future health of the planet? ECN asked environmentalist Aubrey Meyer\* to give his view of the discussions at Unced.**

**T**HE UNITED NATIONS Conference on Environment and Development (Unced), or the so-called 'Earth Summit', recently brought into focus the efforts of the international community to protect the global environment by curtailing unsustainable development. Sadly though, these efforts were undermined throughout, principally by the 'me-first' intransigence of the US administration and by those from industry who successfully lobbied it against any measures for compensation or restraint.

In the noisy debate about whether we have exceeded the limits of biospheric tolerances which has put 'survival' so decisively on the agenda, it is becoming increasingly apparent that equity is the global political price of re-establishing equilibrium in the ecosystem. If nothing else, the Unced has assisted in getting recognition for this new reality.

Can we reconcile the varied and invariably conflicting interests of the powerful, the prosperous, the plebeian, the imperiled and the poverty-struck? There is no simple answer, but we must recognise that what was once a moral dilemma has now become a practical imperative – either we share fairly the finite resources of life at no more than sustainable rates of use, or the biosphere will be damaged beyond its capacity to sustain many species – our own included.

To make matters more difficult the Unced preparations clearly established the relevance of the uneasy questions long haunting the international debate; namely that much Southern poverty and consequent local environmental degradation can be explained by the global economic system, inequitably operated by the industrialised countries of the North for their own benefit.

As recent reports from the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme and others show, the poor in developing countries now actually measurably subsidise the rich countries through structural adjustment and regimes of export-led growth, inequitable barriers to trade, low commodity prices

and the now seemingly endless regime of debt repayments. All this adds up to a considerable net resources transfer from South to North.

By incapacitating developing countries in this way we compound the global climate changes that we have precipitated, for example by hastening their liquidation of tropical rainforests for debt repayment. Our actually helping to add this damage to our existing industrial damage is sheer folly.

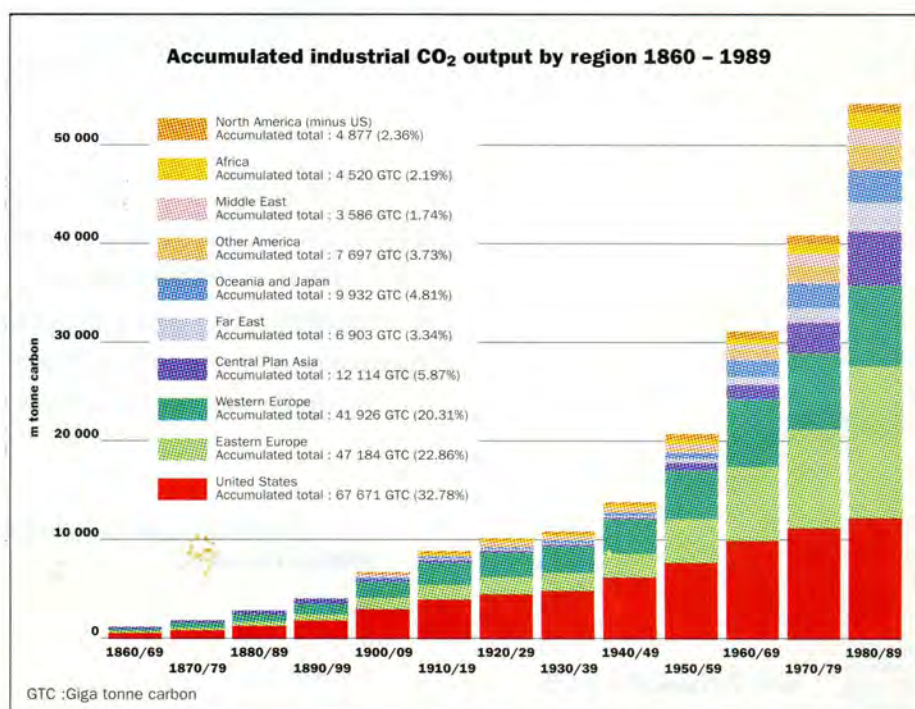
All this explains the 'get-lost' attitude of countries like Malaysia. It certainly had no inclination to accord recognition to the forests as part of the global common heritage. It insisted that 'its' forests were 'sovereign' to be exploited in whatever way it chooses, and that if the forests were so important to the global ecosystem their maintenance should be paid for. The money offered by the North has been insignificant, and the US pursuit of this 'least-cost' forest conservation option for global warming management (plus biotechnology support) is proving to be costly

and dangerous, both politically and ecologically.

In the face of these complex challenges and the intractable politics they generate, we find politicians more and more promoting the idea that business and industry (rather than governments) are the solution to environmental problems. This is true to some extent, but also somewhat ironic. Business and industry have traditionally been a major immediate cause of environmental degradation, and politicians promoting



**Meyer: 'The industrial world's environmental debts are enormous, go back a long way, and still go mostly unaccounted for.'**





the business and industry solution are really acknowledging their own dwindling influence over both supply and demand side behaviour.

This is ever more so in the intensely consumerist democracies of the developed North, where society's well-being is now as good as indexed to an increase in consumerism – in a word, growth. Consumers only elect politicians who offer good news. The good news that electors still want to hear is that increased consumption is assured; politicians can only propose this growth based on the increased production made possible by the expansion of the activities of a business and industry sector ever eager for new profits.

Side-stepping institutional responsibility (and apparently forgetting the extensive US consumer protection legislation), the US administration defensively coined the term 'consumer sovereignty', explaining that, 'we don't tell people what they can and can't buy'.

The problem with all of this, even allowing for industry's increased efficiency, is that any environmental gains are lost in the 'economic' growth of production and consumption. This relentlessly yields a net escalation of pollution and environmental decline. The US EPA currently estimates a 7.5% growth rate of hazardous waste in the US for example, in spite of abatement.

In the context of Unced, this scenario of consumer-led environmental decline has not impressed delegations from developing countries where the *per capita* consumption levels are a fraction of those maintained in the North and often below the threshold of daily survival. When the US as the world's major greenhouse gas polluter refuses emissions restraint, 'consumer sovereignty' translates as 'the United States life-style is non-negotiable'. This really means 'polluter sovereignty'.

Moreover, President Bush's cry of, 'jobs before the environment' was not entirely honest and was hardly an appropriate preface to his subsequent claim that, 'America is the leading environmental nation in this world'. Further, US non-compliance over the bio-diversity treaty made it clear that 'profits before the environment' was really his intention.

It is this US intransigence and irresponsibility over emissions restraint and bio-diversity, more than any other factor, which soured the efforts for global co-operation on climate, species, habitat and especially forest preservation.

However, consumer sovereignty does not necessarily exclude protection of the environment by increasing the price of consumption. Green economists are now arguing for the introduction of a product pricing system which 'internalises' the

full costs of the environmental and social damage caused by production. This alternative to environmental regulation is promoted as the most efficient means of environmental protection through the market.

Apparently to this end, the Unced was vigorously lobbied by some of the market's most active protagonists, the recently formed Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD). This group of around 50 senior executives from multinational corporations including key chemical industry chiefs was constituted at the suggestion of Unced convenor Maurice Strong.

In BCSD's recent manifesto-like publication *Changing Course*, sustainable development is based almost entirely on this idea of full-cost pricing. It is aimed at changing supply and demand behaviour. In theory, in an economy of fully-costed social and environmental transactions, full cost pricing will signal 'least cost equals least damage' and trigger the appropriate behavioural changes.

Taken to the point where environmental protection is achieved commensurate with the scale of the environmental damage we have caused, this is something of a revolutionary goal, as the reverse is almost entirely true of current pricing practice.

Recognising this, BCSD argues for an evolutionary approach, saying that full-cost pricing 'must proceed using imperfect existing knowledge and imperfect available tools... [but]... the lack of accuracy in determining the actual and future costs of pollution should not allow us to conclude that no price can be established at all.' This gradualist approach presumably also creates the breathing space for the BCSD to achieve its concurrent stated aim of achieving sustainable development whilst still maintaining profits to industry.

This reveals a telling ambivalence in corporate motivation, and may still

amount to having someone else's cake and eating it, because the industrial world's environmental debts are enormous, go back a long way, and still go mostly unaccounted for.

However, if politicians see an enhanced role for multinationals in the pursuit of sustainable development, BCSD feels that this is clearly reciprocal. 'As individuals set prices for privately-owned goods, society must establish through political processes prices for the use of goods held in common – water, atmosphere and so on. This work must be based on the best available scientific evidence and on people's preferences and choices.' The implications of this are immense. Nothing less than the recognition of equal rights of benefit from the resources of the global commons is required. BCSD's challenge is as much to politicians as to business and industry itself.

But since they, like most Unced participants, declare climate change to be the potentially most serious of all the environmental threats, both politically and ecologically, it would have been appropriate for them to acknowledge the extent to which past (vast) profits to industrialists have been generated at the expense of the greenhouse gas source/sink equilibrium for example. Since politicians from the industrialised countries have been unable to face this difficulty, there is a clear role here for leadership within industry.

It would still be prudent for us all – politicians, industrialists and others – to recognise this long-term environmental debt and the loss of equal individual rights of access to a global commons resource (climate stability) engendered by this disequilibrium. China's politics in the climate treaty negotiations made clear the extent to which it still articulates its future energy expectations in terms of 'me-too' exploitation of fossil fuels.

UK prime minister John Major's rather languid judgement that past 'damage was inflicted not out of greed or malice, but out of ignorance' is only partly true and underestimates the immense practical need for redress. Moreover his Darwin Initiative 'for the survival of the species', whilst responsibly helping to put survival on the agenda, has unfortunate overtones of 'survival of the fittest'. In current market terms this implies the survival of the wealthiest.

Still, taken with or without environmental costs internalised, ecologically speaking such ideas are fantasy. Without internalisation we are helplessly on the road to overexploitation and with it, in fully costed global commons resource terms, the fittest – be they individual or corporate – are largely the most environmentally indebted;

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Photo: ICI Plant Protection Division



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perhaps indeed the least fit, the least wealthy.

Without a real commitment on the part of the wealthy to liquidate their environmental debt, they remain as much in danger as everybody else. Inevitably some form of resource and technology re-distribution is a part of any survival strategy. Like it or not, we are even more hostage to China's – not to mention India's – future fossil fuel intentions, that they and others were (or are) to our past (fossil fuel derived) economic dominance. In the face of this, US confrontational tactics have been disgraceful but also naïve. Ecological realities are generating new political realities in the global system.

Now, driven by such survival/equity considerations, some from the multinationals are reincarnating as visionaries and starting to argue for environmental and social equity across the whole spectrum of the global community. They have begun to broaden their assessment of who their stakeholders are: not only employees and shareholders but also suppliers, customers, neighbours, citizens' groups and others.

BCSD further acknowledges that 'large numbers of people do not participate in the markets'. In fact we know many of these are actually amongst the market's collateral costs. Huge numbers can barely participate in life at all, let alone the market. If the market and our collective industrial impacts continue to degrade the biosphere, African droughts and desertification, and cyclones devastating low-lying islands and states actually terminate these peoples' interests and

the moral and ethical basis of our civilization, as well as a threat to its survival.'

Recognition and defence of the basic rights to the commons – 'green rights' – of these 'others' is the greatest challenge for those business visionaries who would change course. Perhaps they may join their voices to the others who have endorsed the statement in the panel. It was widely circulated in the Unced preparations.

This Global Commons Institute statement issued a year ago has since been signed by hundreds of people from all over the world including many senior European politicians, environment climatologists and environment/development experts. US-led polluter sovereignty at the Unced was not a satisfactory response. The truth is that if the North in general and the US in particular, had been more honest about the on-record inequitable as well as unsustainable use of the global commons (particularly the 'over-filling of sinks'), the South might have been more amenable to forest conservation and the proposed convention. All three conventions have forests as a major component, and while they clearly are global commons assets, they are in conventional economic terms quite obviously primarily the national economic assets of the countries in which they stand. One angry South East Asian delegate, defensive about deforestation, asked if a further convention for the prevention of fossil fuel destruction was going to be put on the agenda as well.

It is no accident that Fidel Castro received the longest applause of any leader in Rio for the following words: 'The

main responsibility for the atrocious destruction of the environment lies with the consumer societies. They are the offspring of the old colonialist and imperialist policy that engendered the poverty and backwardness which are today the scourge of the majority of mankind. We need less luxury and waste in a few countries so there can be less poverty and hunger in the greatest part of the world.'

Even George Bush was seen to applaud this speech. Given all this, it cannot be a surprise to

anyone that the developing countries looked for – and found – a way to fight back. In the post-Unced new world order, mutually assured destruction (MAD) has been replaced by mutual ecological blackmail (MEB) between the North and

'We the undersigned acknowledge with concern that climate change through human-enhanced global warming is a real and growing threat, and is caused by the emissions of long-lived greenhouse gases from human activities. The IPCC advises that to stabilise atmospheric concentrations requires a reduction to less than 40% of current emissions levels. On average each person in the world contributes 1.65 tonne of carbon and equivalents (TCE) each year; 40% of this figure (ie 66 TCE) thus represents each individual's output threshold for forcing future climate change. Currently 53% of people in the world produce greenhouse gases at or below this threshold figure and together their emissions constitute only 90% of the 'nonforcing' total. They therefore provide the equivalent of a 10% credit which is taken up by the rest of the world. This inequity is particularly unacceptable at a time when the majority of people are struggling to meet basic human needs. It is also unacceptable as the 'forcing' emissions total is derived largely from unsustainable luxury-based activities in countries, one of whose governments has still refused even the principle of setting targets for emissions stabilization, let alone reduction. We believe that all people present and future should have rights to life and sustainable livelihoods which are free of the threat and the reality of human-induced climate disruption. We stress that responsibility for taking corrective action and reducing bad practice lies with those who created and who continue to exacerbate this global crisis. We demand that their response should be immediate and without prevarication.'

Global Commons Institute statement

the South, and the industrialised countries have only got themselves and George Bush to blame.

To overcome the new and deluded 'me-first-or-me-only' narcissism of the powerful, the articulation and defence of green rights globally has to be at the core of our strategy for ecological recovery from now on. Across the board, fairness is the *sine qua non* of survival. If politicians cannot understand this and provide leadership, perhaps the corporate visionaries can? ■

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Photo: Shell

become our *memento mori*.

While circumstantial evidence for these linkages is growing, 'the tragedy is that poverty and hunger exist in a world never better able to eliminate them,' said Maurice Strong. 'This is surely a denial of