
*Environmental Decline
and
Public Policy*

Pattern, Trend and Prospect

Timothy C. Weiskel
and
Richard A. Gray

THE PIERIAN PRESS
Ann Arbor, Michigan

1992

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Chapter I

Devising Public Policy in an Ecological Community

I believe we are on the road to tragedy.

MAURICE STRONG

Secretary General of UNCED, 14 June 1992

It is hard to read the newspapers on environmental matters without being left with an uneasy sense that we face an enormous mismatch problem. The institutions, the leadership, the public understanding, and the collective vision that we currently possess simply do not match the immense ecological crises we now face. Moreover, the available tools for formulating public policy seem woefully inadequate for the range of global problems before us.

The tragedy is not simply the lack of tools. Indeed, tools of all shapes and sizes abound. Everyone seems to have a favorite formula or a technological marvel to arrest or reverse environmental decline. But tools in themselves are only part of the solution. The larger problem is one of matching the tools to the tasks. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with a dentist's pick; nor is there anything wrong with a jack-hammer. There is, however, something fundamentally misguided in trying to repair a public highway with a dentist's pick or in attempting to undertake the work of dentistry with a jack-hammer. In the first instance the effort is clearly silly; in the second, it would turn out to be excruciatingly painful and destructive.

In addressing the social and economic aspects of environmental change we face the same problem: the tools available and tasks at hand are sadly mismatched. Using mechanisms like market pricing, taxation, government regulation, and negotiated treaties to fine-tune human behavior in a complex and fragile ecosystem can prove to be either patently silly or painfully destructive. In short, we have a long way to go and not much time left to match the appropriate tools to the needed tasks.

Difficult as they may seem, our problems would be relatively simple if all we had to do was mix and match existing tools with well-known tasks. But this is not the case. Scientists persistently point out that in an ecosystem nothing remains static. All the components are perpetually in motion. Thus, as agents in the ecosystem, the tasks required of us are

always changing as well. In response, new tools of public policy, new institutions, new leadership qualities, and a new common vision and commitment need to be forged. Here lies the true challenge before us as a human community within the global ecosystem.

Are we up to the task? Does our leadership see what is at stake? Are the world's citizens prepared to change their habitual behavior and make the necessary sacrifices for our collective survival?

Unfortunately there is mounting evidence that our collective capacity to forge new policy tools, create new institutions, and develop new leadership qualities may be declining just when it is most urgently required. At the very least, it seems that our ability to formulate effective public policy is not evolving quickly enough to match the accelerating pace of global environmental decline.

The year 1992 may well be remembered by future generations as a tragic milestone in this regard. The year is barely half over as this manuscript goes to press, yet several events have already occurred that will no doubt serve to single out this year as particularly significant in the history of humanity's relation to its earth environment.

Most notable on a global level, 1992 was the year of the Earth summit. For the first time in the history of humankind, heads of state from around the world convened specifically to consider the condition of the earth's ecological systems, the growing needs of humankind, and numerous concrete proposals to move the world's economies toward sustainable development. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) convened in Rio, Brazil for twelve days in early June of 1992 after more than two years of advanced preparation. As the Secretary General of the UNCED conference, Maurice Strong, concluded at the end of the historic meeting: "After the summit, the world will never be the same."¹ In the presence of over one hundred heads of state who attended the meetings, Maurice Strong emphasized the importance of the events: "This indeed is a historic moment for humanity....It has indeed been a profound human experience from which none of us can emerge unchanged."²

Compared with the fitful and fragmentary efforts in the past, the accomplishments of the Rio Conference were in fact impressive. Five major documents emerged from the meetings: the Rio Declaration, setting forth general principles of environmental protection and sustainable development; a convention on global warming; a convention on biodiversity; a protocol on global forests; and a massive document known as "Agenda 21," designed as a blueprint for explicit actions by nation-states as the world approaches the twenty-first century.

But by the end of the summit, an air of disappointment hung over the proceedings. Because of the United States government's refusal to sign the biodiversity convention and its successful efforts to lobby against

language to set any timetables or targets for reducing carbon emissions, many participants felt that the summit fell short of its promise. Moreover, Third World participants from the nations of the "South" were bitterly disappointed at the unwillingness of "Northern" countries to provide the substantial new funding necessary to execute the ambitious plans outlined in the Agenda 21.

Throughout the conference the debate was starkly drawn between the contrasting perspectives of the North and the South. The tension was poignantly expressed in the words of India's Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao, when he observed in his address to the summit that "We have only one planet, but many worlds."³

As if to underscore the sad truth of this observation the American government insisted upon distancing itself from efforts to reach global agreement on key environmental issues. In Washington on Thursday, 11 June, before leaving for the summit, President George Bush announced that "If the United States has to be the only country to challenge the biodiversity treaty, so be it."⁴ As he stepped on to Air Force One to begin his trip to Rio, Bush reasserted in a defiant tone that he refused to sign the biodiversity agreement because he felt it had the potential of costing Americans both jobs and money. "I am determined to protect the environment, and I am determined to protect U.S. taxpayers. The day of the open checkbook is over."⁵

Upon arriving in Rio, President Bush seemed to sense the disapproval and disappointment of other world leaders, but he responded with chauvinism and defiance. In his speech before the world gathering on Friday, 12 June, Bush declared:

Let's face it, there has been some criticism of the United States. But I must tell you, we come to Rio proud of what we have accomplished and committed to extending the record on American leadership on the environment. In the United States, we have the world's tightest air quality standards on cars and factories, the most advanced laws for protecting lands and waters, and the most open processes for public participation.

And now for a simple truth: America's record on environmental protection is second to none. So I did not come here to apologize.⁶

In a flourish of rhetorical bravado apparently designed to counteract criticism for not signing the biodiversity treaty, President Bush went on to affirm:

We come to Rio prepared to continue America's unparalleled efforts to preserve species and habitat. And let me be clear, our efforts to protect biodiversity itself will exceed, *will exceed* the requirements of the treaty....

[I]t is never easy, *it is never easy* to stand alone on principle, but sometimes leadership requires that you do. And now is such a time.⁷

Even as he was making this emphatic declaration of principle, however, President Bush's words were contradicted by events in the United States. On the morning of 12 June it was announced in Washington that the Supreme Court had ruled in favor of a long-standing Bush administration legal suit to *reduce* the rights of U.S. citizens to take legal action on behalf of endangered species in the United States and around the world. James H. Rubin of the *Associated Press* filed a report on the Court's decision only hours before the President's speech in Rio, commenting in his story on the coincidence of the two events:

The Supreme Court today limited the right of environmentalists to sue over federal support of projects overseas that allegedly threaten endangered species.

The 7-2 ruling, a victory for the Bush administration coincidentally handed down the day the president attends the Earth Summit in Brazil, overturned a victory for wildlife groups that seek to preserve endangered species outside U.S. borders.

The dissenters condemned the decision as "a slash and burn expedition" that could cost the environment dearly.⁸

Neither President Bush nor any of the American delegation commented on the apparent discrepancy between the President's solemn declarations to world leaders and the administration's final victory in the legal battle that Bush had waged *against* the environmental groups that work to protect endangered species. Reporters covering the Rio summit were apparently unaware of the Supreme Court's announcement, and no one in Rio questioned the President about this glaring contradiction.

Some observers speculated in the days surrounding the summit that President Bush's behavior at Rio had little to do with the summit in any case. The Rio statements, they suggested, were part of a calculated effort to appeal to particular business interests and conservative political constituents in an election year.⁹ While President Bush denied this in a news conference in Rio on Saturday, 13 June, his choice of words indicated that what he called "business rights" were an important part of his decision not to sign the biodiversity treaty.

I'm not pressured by domestic politics as to what our sound environmental practices are. We've got sound environmental practices. We are not going to sign up to things that we can't do. We're not going to sign up to things we don't believe in. I happen to believe that in biodiversity, it is important to protect our rights, our business rights.¹⁰

The international reaction to the Bush position was nearly universal. Even before Bush's speech José Goldemberg, Brazil's Minister of Education and Minister of the Environment, summed it up plainly: "There is a generalized feeling of resentment against President Bush....Most delegates, who will obviously receive the American president in a respectful manner, are disappointed in him because of his refusal to sign the biological diversity treaty."¹¹ In addition leaders of various non-governmental organizations expressed their disappointment with the American President. Magda Renner, president of Friends of the Earth International, made the distinction between the American government and its people: "We can't blame Americans, but we blame the government....For years, we tried not to be personal.... Now it's time to point the finger and say, 'You are responsible. You are accountable.' And Bush is," Renner said.¹²

Whether Bush was defending narrow business interests, or appealing to the political right wing, or—for that matter—whether he genuinely felt himself to be acting "to protect U.S. taxpayers," it became clear to the world at large from Bush's performance at Rio that the United States had abdicated its role as an international leader on matters relating to the environment.

By the end of the meetings the official summit organizers were clearly disappointed as well. On Sunday, 14 June, in a news conference Maurice Strong issued a final impassioned appeal to the world leaders to respond to the gravity of the deteriorating environmental situation, particularly the circumstances in the Third World. He insisted that the summit had not been a failure, but as he put it: "We have got agreements without sufficient commitments." He added, "I would have liked to have seen a more solid and a more forthcoming commitment by major donors."¹³

In what many took to be a direct reference to the disappointing positions taken by the United States government, Strong underscored that political leadership in North America seemed to remain blind to the realities at hand, preferring instead to pursue traditional strategies of economic growth that protect the status quo:

"The current [North America] lifestyles are not sustainable. But that message has still not got through to some political leaders," he said. "I don't agree that the status quo is the answer because the status quo will not survive. The evidence is very clear."¹⁴

Then, as he reflected over the last twenty years of his own efforts since the 1972 Stockholm United Nations Conference on the Environment, Maurice Strong seemed momentarily overwhelmed by a certain sense of frustration that more had not been achieved in Rio to convince the world's political leadership of the need to act now in consort. Reporters from the *Washington Post* described the scene, capturing the drama of his candid remarks:

"When we thought we did it in Stockholm, we didn't," said Canadian Strong, choking back tears as he recalled the 1972 conference on the environment in Sweden. "And, we don't have another 20 years now. I believe we are on the road to tragedy."¹⁵

* * *

We will not know for years or even decades whether Maurice Strong's bleak assessment at the close of the Rio summit will turn out to be true. Nevertheless, it seems clear that if collective ecological decline is to be arrested and reversed, a new kind of vision will need to inform political leaders and public policy makers around the globe. Moreover this vision and a sense of common commitment will have to be generated and shared by ordinary citizens throughout the world. If the Rio summit proved anything, it is that current political leaders are by and large far too short-sighted to respond effectively to the global environmental challenges before the human community.

The reasons for this are understandable if not pardonable. In autocratic or authoritarian regimes the environment has often been ignored, or—worse yet—simply pillaged and ravaged in pursuit of state production goals or personal enrichment of a few. Democratic regimes have not fared much better. Here the reason is that in most of the world's representative democracies the means and methods of ascending to political leadership have traditionally had little or nothing to do with developing an awareness of the environment or demonstrating an understanding of global systemic process.

On the contrary, political elites in democracies are typically quite skilled in focusing upon immediate crises and localized constituencies. In these circumstances the calculus of visible, short-term mutual benefit

is preeminent. This leaves out most of the world, most of the time. Public policy decisions made in the United States frequently have grave and enduring implications for the welfare of citizens in foreign countries, but their interests are rarely considered paramount in determining policy for one simple reason: foreigners cannot vote in United States elections so politicians can afford to be indifferent to their plight. The same is true for future generations. As one Senator put it in defending his lack of resolute action on environmental matters, "What have future generations done for me lately?"

In most democracies there is no sizable, well organized group that will vote on behalf of these structurally disenfranchised populations so it is hardly surprising that in elective democracies global environmental concerns are of secondary importance to traditional political elites. Indeed, in these days of television and media pollsters, the so-called political leadership has transformed itself into a species of political followership, capable of shifting a carefully crafted message instantaneously to target just the right combination of constituencies needed to win fifty percent of the vote plus one in order to declare victory.

After the twenty years of reflection and environmental action since the 1972 U.N. conference on the environment in Stockholm, citizens around the globe may well have hoped to see heads of state meet in Rio at the world's first Earth summit to make important and timely decisions for the future benefit of humankind, but what we all witnessed instead was a gathering of politicians, most of whom were preoccupied with the narrow calculus of partisan debate and constituent patronage. Few of these political figures demonstrated that they were capable of seeing let alone responding to the global ecological crisis facing humankind as a whole.

Even if eventually a well functioning democratic process manages some day to take the interests of future generations, of the socially disenfranchised, and of citizens outside its borders into account in making public policy, our problems would not be solved. The reason for this is simple: humans are only one species in a vast and complex web of life-forms on the planet. In responding to *human* needs and *human* desires, elective democracies may eventually improve their capacity to respond to short-term human need. But what about the myriad other species upon whom we depend in ways we are just beginning to discover or do not yet recognize? What of the welfare of the planet as a whole?

No known ecosystem has ever functioned for long when the needs of only one of its constituent species are met to the exclusion of others. The needs of all constituent species must be met for the system to function as a complete system. The earth's entire ecosystem will be no exception to this universal law of ecology. Similarly, no organism can outlive its life support system for very long, so it would make sense for all humans

to preserve and protect the multiple life forms upon whom our life depends.

It is tempting to declare that human needs must come first, yet ironically, pursuing this as the singular logic of public policy would lead to accelerated ecological collapse. Humans cannot always come first. Some principle of restraint must come into play for each species in an ecosystem—for humans as well as for all others. Without a governing principle of self-limitation populations rapidly escalate out of control driving the ecosystem toward chronic instability. While it is true that humans select or elect those who formulate public policy, developing that policy solely on the basis of immediate human needs would be a formula for ecological suicide. The preservation and health of plant and animal biodiversity must be an urgent task for anyone who seeks to formulate public policy for a sustainable world.

How then are we to devise effective public policy for the environment in the broader ecological community we inhabit? Even the most refined political institutions that we possess are still designed primarily to meet human needs, but as we have just seen, responding to human needs alone will not be enough to enable us to preserve and survive in a functioning ecosystem. What then are we to do? How can we make wise public policy for the ecological community as a whole?

The answer to this conundrum lies in fashioning a radically new sense of citizenship and an entirely new political process to reflect that citizenship. Public policy needs to be formulated on the basis of a fundamentally new and more inclusive sense of community. Snails and whales do not vote—indeed they cannot vote. Yet if their interests—and the interests of all the other seen and unseen species—cannot be represented in our political process, public policy is bound to fail even its human constituency. We need, in short, to work hard in the months, years, and decades ahead to forge a new and compelling sensibility in the public at large that we all are citizens of a global ecological community and a new kind of political leadership is required to reflect that fact.

In spite of the structural impediments of the political process and despite Maurice Strong's momentary personal sense of discouragement, it is worth noting that there are at least some encouraging signs that this process is already underway. A series of committees in the United States House of Representatives and the Senate have for a number of years been listening to the testimony of citizens, consumer groups, environmental activists, and scientists who have all emphasized the urgency of impending environmental changes and the need to develop a new style of political leadership to address them.

Years of organizing among a sizable coalition of scientists, environmentalists, and national religious leaders culminated in joint hearings between the House and Senate in May 1992, just prior to the Rio

summit. Calling themselves the "Joint Appeal by Religion and Science for the Environment," the group held two days of hearings, seminars, and briefing sessions for members of Congress. In addition, they presented a statement to the Senate leadership signed by over one hundred eminent scientists, national religious leaders, and sympathetic House and Senate members, outlining the dimensions of their global environmental concern and asserting, "We believe that the dimensions of this crisis are still not sufficiently taken to heart by our leaders, institutions and industries." The Joint Appeal's declaration went on to state: "We call upon our government to change national policy so that the United States will begin to ease, not continue to increase, the burdens on our biosphere and their effect upon the planet's people."¹⁶

In part as a result of this crescendo of public concern, some of the Congressional leadership have begun to articulate the need for a more inclusive political process and a longer-term vision to match the scope of global environmental change. On 13 May, Senate majority leader George Mitchell read the full text of the Joint Appeal declaration into the Congressional Record, applauding the efforts of the group to bring these issues to the top of the public policy agenda.¹⁷

Individual senators had already taken leadership roles on selected environmental issues. Senator Timothy Wirth of Colorado had long been an advocate of environmental legislation. Environmentalists were disappointed when he decided not to run for reelection to his Senate seat, but other senators have become more vocal on environmental issues. Senator Albert Gore, Jr., of Tennessee, for example, developed a national reputation for leadership on global environmental issues. Building upon the scientific evidence presented to him in numerous Senate hearings, expressing a personal sense of obligation for future generations, and drawing upon a deep spiritual commitment to honor the sacredness of creation, Senator Gore published a remarkable book in February 1992 entitled *Earth in the Balance*, in which he summarized the global environmental challenge before us.¹⁸

The book provides an excellent summary of the evidence on population growth, environmental deterioration, global warming, and stratospheric ozone depletion. In addition, however, Senator Gore discusses both the values questions inherent in formulating environmental policy and the political changes that will need to occur to address global environmental issues. In a chapter entitled "A New Common Purpose," Senator Gore puts the issue quite clearly:

I have come to believe that we must take bold and unequivocal action: we must make the rescue of the environment the central organizing principle for civilization. Whether we realize it or not, we are now engaged in an epic battle

to right the balance of our earth, and the tide of this battle will turn only when the majority of people in the world become sufficiently aroused by a shared sense of urgent danger to join an all-out effort.¹⁹

As the American public learned in early July, it was in part because of his demonstrated knowledge of and commitment to environmental matters that Governor Bill Clinton selected Al Gore to be his Vice Presidential running mate.²⁰ Senator Gore made no secret of his commitments in these matters. After years of holding hearings, writing articles, and giving speeches on environmental matters, he led the United States Congressional delegation to the Earth summit in June. There he witnessed President Bush's disappointing performance.

Referring to the conduct of President Bush and his advisors at Rio during his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention Senator Gore was blunt: "They embarrassed our nation when the whole world was asking for American leadership in confronting the environmental crisis. It is time for them to go."²¹ Within hours of Senator Gore's speech, the highly popular but still undeclared candidate for President, Ross Perot, decided that the Democratic party had indeed been "revitalized" and he announced he was withdrawing from the presidential race.²²

Rarely has there been such a swift and dramatic political response to the failure of environmental leadership. Within one month of President Bush's provocative pronouncements in Brazil, the largest political party in the United States embraced a forceful and effective spokesperson for environmental causes and began to campaign to reverse the Bush administration's record on environmental matters. Having been despondent in mid-June after Rio, many environmentalists were elated by mid-July.²³ They began to feel that for the first time in a national election they had the possibility of campaigning for and voting for a proven pro-environment candidate. At least in some instances, then, there seems to have been a shift of perspective on environmental issues in national political circles. It remains to be seen whether this kind of leadership will prevail in a national election, but the issues are squarely joined and a clear choice will be presented to the electorate in November 1992.

If political leadership has begun to reorient itself toward recognizing the urgency of the environmental crisis, it is not yet clear that beyond the environmentalist community the general public is equally informed or motivated to act on these issues. Electoral appeals for fundamental change on environmental matters may be novel and even moving, but such appeals will only succeed if ordinary citizens recognize and respond to a radically new concept of community and accept the responsibilities of ecological citizenship that this new sense of community requires.

To begin with it is helpful to reexamine the historical patterns of environmental decline that have characterized past cultures and then turn to a sober assessment of the trends currently underway in the contemporary world.

Notes

1. Ken Silverstein, "Earth Summit," *AP Newswire*, 14 June 1992, 15:02.
2. "Earth Summit Ends 12-Day Meeting to Save Planet," *Reuter Newswire*, 14 June 1992, 17:24.
3. "Earth Summit: Speakers Mix Accusations and Promises," *IPS Newswire*, 12 June 1992.
4. "Earth Summit: Leaving for Rio, Bush Says No More Blank Checks," *IPS Newswire*, 14 June 1992.
5. "Earth Summit: Leaving for Rio, Bush Says No More Blank Checks."
6. "Bush-Summit-Text," *AP Newswire*, 12 June 1992, 15:14.
7. "Bush-Summit Text."
8. James H. Rubin, "Scotus-Endangered Species," *AP Newswire*, 12 June 1992, 10:22 aed. The case was known as 90-1424 Manuel Lujan Jr., Secretary of the Interior vs. Defenders of Wildlife, et al. See also: Greg Henderson, "Court Says Environmental Groups Can't Sue U.S. for ...," *UPI Newswire*, 12 June 1992, 13:23; and Ruth Marcus, "Justices Make It Harder to Press Environmental Enforcement Cases," *Washington Post*, 13 June 1992.
9. Senator Tim Wirth of Colorado, a member of the U.S. Congressional delegation, indicated that he felt the President's entire strategy surrounding the summit was motivated by domestic political concerns. "The U.S. has allowed itself to be isolated here because of its rigid adherence to the...right wing." See: Michael Weisskopf, "Behind the Curve in Rio; Unhappy Allies Await Bush in Rio," *Washington Post*, 11 June 1992.
10. "Bush-Excerpts," *AP Newswire*, 13 June 1992, 12:02.
11. Ruth Sinai, "Bush-Summit," *AP Newswire*, 12 June 1992, 00:36.
12. Ruth Sinai.
13. "Earth Summit: UNCED—'A High Point, but not the End Point'," *IPS Newswire*, 14 June 1992.
14. "Earth Summit: UNCED—'A High Point, but not the End Point'."
15. Julia Preston and Michael Weisskopf, "Rio Organizer Says Summit Fell Short," *Washington Post*, 15 June 1992.

16. "ENVIRONMENT: U.S. Scientists, Clergy Pledge Joint Efforts," *IPS Newswire*, 15 May 1992, 12:11 aed.

17. *The Congressional Record*, 102d Congress, Second Session, vol. 138, no. 66, 13 May 1992.

18. Al Gore, *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

19. Al Gore, p. 269.

20. In announcing his choice of Senator Gore, Governor Clinton said: "Today, he [Senator Gore] is perhaps better known than anything else for his willingness and readiness, his commitment and his ability to do something that George Bush is not willing to do, to be a leader in protecting the world's environment. Al Gore has spent the last decade working on the global environmental challenges; we desperately need to address: global warming, ozone depletion, energy conservation. He has written a magnificent book on his thoughts and recommendations. He has asked me to join in his commitment to preserve not only the environment of America, but to preserve the environment of our globe for future generations. And together, we will finally give the United States a real environmental presidency." "CVN--Clinton-Gore Excerpts," *AP Newswire*, 9 July 1992, 19:14 ped.

21. "CVN--Gore-Text," *AP Newswire*, 17 July 1992, 03:40 aed.

22. The UPI news service reported on the Perot news conference quoting Perot: "I decided that it was definitely going into the House of Representatives," he said, adding that the Democratic Party had done 'a brilliant job' of revitalizing the party." *UPI Newswire*, 16 July 1992, 0:32 aed.

23. The Associated Press reported that: "Sierra Club political director Reid Wilson issued a statement calling Gore 'an outstanding choice'."

"There is a world of difference between Sen. Gore and his counterpart, Vice President Quayle," Wilson said. "Sen. Gore is extremely knowledgeable about environmental problems and has worked hard to keep the environment at the top of the nation's agenda. He's a leader on the issue."

"Al Gore will ignite the environmental community at the grassroot levels," said Jim Maddy, executive director of the League of Conservation Voters. And the group's president, Bruce Babbitt, another 1988 candidate, said Gore was recognized as "someone who is committed to environmental issues."

Sen. Tim Wirth, D-Colo., said the ticket represented "a new generation of leadership to guide the United States from the Cold War into the 21st century." *AP Newswire*, 10 July 1992, 01:45 aed; "Gore-Environment," *AP Newswire*, 10 July 1992, 16:42 ped.