

Even Greenest Not Enough

may possibly have a long-term, subtle influence on human or animal physiology. Finally, the jury is out on whether biotechnology will be a savior or a bane, and the risk of nanotechnology is as yet as unknown as its putative environmental benefits.

As Irving Selikoff, the foremost authority on asbestos, states, the “hidden blessing” of thalidomide was that it produced obvious birth defects and its use could be quickly terminated. In contrast, the concern today is that the ever-growing mix of new synthetic substances that power the modern material economy may have no immediate, obvious impact. In the case of thalidomide, the issue was not discovered before its introduction in Europe because it was tested only in rats and not rabbits. Why were the implications regarding ethanol fuels not thoroughly evaluated prior to introduction? The methods to evaluate these products existed at the time. What about the dangers of leaded gasoline and a host of other substances where the warning signs flashed for decades? How could these breakdowns in feedback and control exist?

While stories of carnage and murder get compressed into sound bites that lead at the top of the news hour, complex stories of long-term environmental degradation just do not command attention. They are not entertaining; they’re depressing. Today’s 24/7 news cycle is as much about entertainment as it is information. One only needs to look at the 2005 United Nations *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Synthesis Report*, which discovered that 15 of 24 ecosystems are being degraded or used unsustainably. It is only natural to assume that this major finding by a prestigious body of scientists would be well-known, but a relatively small percentage of environmental professionals have heard of this report.

In developed countries, the nature of environmental concerns has now changed. Lifestyle issues such as consumption patterns are a driv-

It cannot be denied that some corporations have over-sold their green credentials, tossing around their superficial support for “sustainable development” loosely to impress stakeholders. Yet growing numbers of firms are finding it valuable to make real improvements in their social, environmental, and economic performance. Still others are going deeper, transparently working with stakeholder groups to assess such performance and extend triple-bottom-line considerations to their products, services, and value chains. Still others like Aveda, Natura, and Seventh Generation have made the TBL the core of their business models. But even the greenest of companies aren’t doing enough.

The problem is not that we have over-emphasized sustainable development, but rather we haven’t emphasized it enough and in the right ways. Many sustainability problems are growing worse and threaten to undermine our society in ways the public does not perceive. How many are tuned into the serious threat climate change will pose to worldwide food supplies? How many appreciate the fact that we’ll need five worlds’ worth of resources to satisfy the citizens of China, India, and other developing nations if they all achieve America’s levels of prosperity and consumption.

Many blame our politicians for lacking the courage to make the tough decisions to set us on the right course. But politicians take their cues from voters — voters often wed to the status quo. A few enlightened leaders and media, working together, can make a big difference in voter awareness and attitudes, though; witness the im-

pact of Al Gore and his film on the U.S. climate change debate. Teachers and professors, scientists and think tanks, NGOs and business groups must all do a better job helping us understand sustainable development and the impact and interconnectivity of the issues it embraces.

But creating the political impetus to act must be followed with smart policymaking. Given that “light brings heat, heat brings change,” transparent financial reporting must be expanded to the TBL. Incentives must be created to change consumer and business behavior. As the OPEC oil embargo of the 1970s and recent \$4 gas has shown, economic incentives can

drive energy efficiency much more effectively than any mandated fuel economy standard. And why not adjust capital gains taxes more to better stimulate long term investment and corporate thinking. Where’s the increased support

for the education of women in developing nations — an effort that studies have shown can clearly reduce the population growth?

The answer isn’t to deemphasize sustainable development, but rather to increase society’s awareness about it, and about the solutions that can encourage behaviors by all of us that will save us and future generations from ourselves.

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