

## Reflections on the State of the World — 7

### "Its Most Unfortunate About the Environment"

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Over the past year or so, we've heard any number of times from good-hearted people that in order to make a living, they have no choice but to engage in environmentally highly unfriendly behavior, such as jet travel. Often this admission is followed by the incredible and by now platitudinous statement: "It's most unfortunate about the environment." In other words, the welfare of the environment comes after all other considerations.

The question is: are those other considerations more vitally important than the plight of the environment? Does one's personal convenience or spending power exceed in importance and urgency the survival of entire species, even the survival of Earth's biosphere?

We can only surmise that those who insist on business as usual are either wholly ignorant of the present-day environmental collapse or they don't really believe that collapse is imminent, or, a third and imponderable possibility, that they simply don't care. We assume that our contacts belong to the second category.

Just recently a fellow writer of unquestionable intelligence and good intention sent us a couple of government links that favored a rather optimistic outlook about the state of the environment. We had to remind him that governments are notoriously "optimistic" about serious problems that they ought to but really don't want to face. We would call this the head-in-the-sand variety of politics, which falls under the familiar rubric of denial. Governments are run by flesh-and-blood humans, and unless something affects politicians personally and negatively, they are apt to ignore or downplay unpleasant or "inconvenient" realities as do most people.

It would be true to say that the governments of the world are markedly underestimating the environmental decline, and no government would be willing to admit that at this point we have a worldwide emergency. Scientists are only a little less conservative, and despite the shocking evidence at hand, only a small minority has thus far dared to speak of an environmental emergency, but their numbers are swelling as the devastation is becoming less and less deniable.

It is indeed emotionally difficult to accept that biosphere collapse is imminent. All the signs of an ecological breakdown are in front of us, but humanity has opted to proceed with business as usual. This is both painfully sad and maddening to witness. For us, it's like noticing that the big apartment building in which we all live is on fire. The alarm bell is ringing, but the neighbors and the fire department insist that there is only a small trail of smoke coming from the roof and that there is really nothing yet to worry about. Your logical argument that "where there is smoke, there is fire" holds no conviction for them. Legitimate inference is taboo. Even first-hand evidence is deemed inadmissible.

David Suzuki has another striking metaphor for this situation, which we cited in *Green Yoga* (p. 4):

We're in a giant car heading towards a brick wall and everyone's arguing where they're going to sit.

We are often wondering how Suzuki and other scientists who are fully cognizant of what is happening nowadays, or rather what is *not* happening, can still smile or even persist in their unfulfilling job of whistle blowing. Perhaps they don't want to alienate their supporters or antagonize the media by scaring the public too much.

A few readers have protested that our portrayal of the environmental crisis is too scary, too pessimistic, too discouraging. Possibly, though we would counter argue that it is *realistic*; and when the majority of people indulge in make-believe and denial, a dose of realism is, in our view, utterly necessary.

Our human species is behaving in a suicidal fashion with almost everyone turning a blind eye to this normally unacceptable behavior. But then, there is nothing normal about contemporary humanity.

We think that the common pathology can be characterized as a case of severe addiction. We—that is, the wealthy nations—are addicted to consumption at a rate that is far from sustainable. We are addicted to a lifestyle that is detrimental to our own well being and the well being of fellow creatures on this planet. As with other cases of addiction like alcoholism or overeating, we are in a state of serious denial. We firmly believe that overconsumption is appropriate and “normal,” and we are averse to looking at the far-reaching consequences of our behavior.

We should not, as many people are apt to do, put the blame for dealing with the environmental crisis on our governments, because they merely reflect our own unwillingness to face reality. Given the mounting evidence of biosphere collapse, it is still astonishing that governmental targets for remedial action are vastly out of sync with reality and that governmental policies agreed on years ago are poorly implemented and badly faltering.

Recently, at a United Nations summit meeting held in Bonn, experts had to admit that the participating countries would miserably fail to meet an agreed-on 2002 target of slowing down the rate of biodiversity decline by 2010. Species continue to vanish at an alarming rate of about one species every 20 minutes. There is no comfort in the fact that there are millions of species, because most of them are insects.

In the meantime, global warming continues to ravage parts of the world, because worldwide greenhouse gas emissions have not only not been reduced but have in fact increased.

To give some examples: The Mediterranean island of Cyprus, with a population of c. 788,000, is in the grip of a severe drought, which has forced the authorities to drastically cut the water supply to households. A program has been set in motion to import water from nearby Greece, which is also suffering from recurrent droughts and heat waves. In

summer of 2007, for instance, Greece declared a state of emergency on the Cyclades in the Aegean Sea, including several popular tourist destinations.

Many regions of Australia, a drought-ridden nation and continent, are facing severe long-term rainfall deficiencies. The government has even instituted a drought personal support line, which operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The same crisis is affecting many other parts of the world, including the United States. Experts are agreed that booming states like California should not expect abundant rainfall to ease the pressure.

In the meantime, Greenland's enormous ice sheet is melting at a rate faster than anyone had predicted, and the process is in fact accelerating—a phenomenon that no model had taken into account. The consequences are far reaching and devastating, not least to thousands of island nations. Most importantly, the rapid melting of Greenland's ice sheet suggests that the world's climate is in worse shape than predicted.

Recent analyses of ice cores from the Antarctic have convincingly shown that greenhouse gases today are higher than they were 800,000 years ago when a dramatic climate shift took place, which casts our own era in a rather dim light.

As food prices are rocketing around the world, the widespread diversion of crops from food production to biodiesel production has become a top controversy. The European Union won't budge from its projected biodiesel production while the U.S. government once again is pushing to boost its nuclear energy program, which has its own devastating long-term problems.

To grow crops for biodiesel rather than food obviously gives transportation priority over hunger and starvation. No one seems to think of the possibility of cutting back on transportation as an effective means of increasing food crops to feed the millions of starving people in the world. Admittedly, the Bush government has proposed to export genetically engineered crops to alleviate hunger in Africa and elsewhere, but only the most naïve assume that this is for compassionate reasons rather than to support the devious bioengineering industry giants with their nongerminating crops.

Riots over food prices like the one in Haiti can be expected to become more frequent and perhaps more insistent and challenging. Soaring food prices also have had a deleterious effect on the Amazon Rainforest. Deforestation of this vital part of global ecology is seen as a necessity in order to grow food to feed the hungry (or at least to make exorbitant profits for some corporations). The future for the Amazon Rainforest became very much bleaker when just a few days ago, Marina Silva, the Brazilian environment minister, resigned because of the difficulties she has been facing for some time with "carrying out the national environmental agenda."

Because nuclear power stations are relatively slow to pass local public approval, some American legislators are pushing a return to coal-fired power stations to feed the country's habit of energy overconsumption. Since coal is a dirty fuel, this would prove extremely hard on air quality. The U.S. government, in predictable fashion, is considering relaxing existing standards of emissions.

In *Green Yoga* (p. 19), we observed:

We may have just a few years left to take the most drastic measures as a species, not merely as individuals or even as a single nation. The present crisis is something to be very scared about. We must not, however, allow ourselves the luxury of being so petrified that we stand idly by, waiting for doomsday.

In light of the most recent evidence, we must revise our assessment: We have **no more** time left to contemplate whether or not and to what degree we ought to make our lifestyle environment friendly. The present crisis is a dire **emergency**, and we must act now. Since the developed and developing nations are apparently unwilling to act immediately in a significant and concerted manner, we may now prepare for the worst-case scenario to occur in our own lifetime still. This doesn't have anything to do with using scare tactics as a skillful means. It is a straightforward extrapolation from what is happening at present.

Those who insist on perpetuating their lifestyle of overconsumption for whatever short-term reason have a heavy debt to pay later on. There is certainly no question, as someone has foolishly suggested, of being willing to bear the eventual consequences, but of possibly having to witness the suffering of our own children.

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