

The New Moral Code
Environmentalism in the 21st Century
by David O'Toole

"It used to be thought that environmental protection was against the interest of the poor. What the poor needed – in the third world and Britain was economic and employment growth, and these could only be retarded by excessive concern for animals, trees, water quality and so on. We now know however that exactly the reverse is the case. The poorest people almost always live in the poorest environments. In the rural areas of the developing world they have been forced onto marginal lands by the process of enclosure, leading to deforestation, soil erosion, agricultural failure and increasing poverty. In urban areas they die from the diseases of water pollution and insanitary waste disposal, and from pollution emitted by unregulated factories. Global warming will affect the world's poor – those least able to protect themselves against crop failures and rising sea levels – far more severely than the more affluent."

The above is taken from The Real World Coalition's *Politics of the Real World*, which bills itself as a major statement of public concern from over 30 of the UK's leading voluntary and campaigning organisations. Although the above was written seven years ago it could easily have been written yesterday; it is typical of green, environmentalist and sustainability thinking today. As with much of the discussion around sustainability, it puts forward little or no justification of its stance. The authors seem to assume that no proof or statistic that need be put forward and that the reader is already onside.

In some ways no proof, argument or evidence is needed. Although robbed of its mass support in the political arena, itself a symptom of a retreat from political activism in general, the need for an environmentalist approach is taken as read. Environmentalism has genuinely entered the mainstream; politicians of all political persuasions describe themselves as environmentalists, businesses and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), especially those concerned with development, adhere to principles of sustainability, and educational establishments teach environmentalism as an integral part of science subjects. Environmentalism is no longer simply a set of ideas, or a critique of the pattern of development so far - it is the moral code of the beginning of the twenty first century.

This worries me. Every idea should be open to continual question and debate and it seems that that all discussion is now at an end. What is equally worrying is the intrusive nature of the new moralism. No aspect of daily life is free from it; I am told that I should recycle and if I don't I am subject to criticism from many quarters including my wife and children; I am told that I should drive my car only if it is absolutely necessary. Gone are the days when the aspiration for freedom of movement was seen as healthy, rather it would be seen today as selfish and beyond the pale; I am told that I should not eat certain foods, buy certain brands or do a myriad of other things that are seen as 'unfriendly' to the environment or 'unsustainable.'

Whatever happened to the idea of progress and a better future? I still believe in both. The Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future* (1987), defines sustainable development as "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Implicit in this definition is the idea that the old pattern of development could not be sustained. Is this true? Development in the past was driven by growth and innovation. It led to new technologies and huge improvements in living standards. To assume that we know what the circumstances or needs of future generations will be is mistaken and inevitably leads to the debilitating sense that we are living on borrowed time.

Only if we assume that society will remain static can we understand the needs of the future. The way we live today could not have been predicted twenty years ago. The sustainability paradigm fails to recognise this. It is a static view and thus places limits on human ingenuity. Similarly a whole host of false assumptions dominate environmental thought; the scale of problems is exaggerated, the amount of resources is underestimated and spurious links are made between areas such as green policies and profit, poverty and environmental degradation. Those of us who want a better future need to question these assumptions.

One example of the way that the scale of problems is consistently overestimated is landfill. The United States, as the epitome of the throwaway society, produces the most waste per head of any country, yet the area required to cater for the waste produced by it during the entire twenty first century has been calculated as less than 18 square miles. This is less than 0.009 per cent of the area of the country (Lomborg, 2002)

It has been argued in the past that we cannot continue our growth due to dwindling resources. It is interesting that, even where it has been recognised that resources such as oil have are more plentiful than was thought in the past, the idea of limits still dominates the discussion. In 1972 The Club of Rome produced its seminal report *Limits to Growth*, probably the most influential work of the environmental movement, which made claims about

oil reserves. However, by the time its follow-up *Factor Four* was written in 1997 we knew of 5 times the stores of oil untapped than had been thought to be left in the 1970s. The authors of *Factor Four* readily admit this, yet still take the limits premise as read.

The misleading connections made between environmentalism and increased profitability can be seen in the following example. Here is a quote from an agency promoting new business start-ups.

"Businesses taking up best practice on environmental issues can expect to see an increase in profits, according to the Business Environmental Training Initiative. It predicts bottom-line increases of between 1% and 4% for businesses implementing green policies."

How does concern for the environment translate into extra profits? Is it that, in a climate in which environmental concern is central, companies must adhere to the new ethics to attract custom? Or are there other gains to be made? Following the link reveals that the main increase in revenue came from avoiding punitive legislation.

"However, significant numbers of respondents believed there was a link between good practice and increased sales, reduced operating costs, improved relationships with customers and workforce motivation, although avoiding prosecution was viewed as the main benefit of introducing a successful environmental policy."

Thus the environmental policy does not contribute to the profitability in any real sense at all. In practice it is companies that are well organised and efficient, or that are already comfortably profitable, that have time to establish and police environmental policies. However, if profitable companies are the ones most likely to establish "environmental best practice" this is confusing cause with effect. It is not that environmental best practice causes profitability, but that being profitable allows for concern for the environment.

It is seen as axiomatic by many that the wealth gained during the twentieth century has been at the expense of our overall quality of life. In other words we may be richer because we have more material goods but we are all poorer because we live in a poorer environment. But the UN wrote in 1997: *"Few people realize the great advances already made. In the past 50 years poverty has fallen more than in the previous 500. And it has been reduced in some respects in all countries"* and the World Bank wrote in 1998: *"there has been a reduction in poverty during the last few years throughout most of southern Asia and parts of the Middle East, North Africa and Latin America."*

In an attempt to determine if this growth is at the expense of the environment it is possible to plot figures for economic development and pollution for all countries where these figures are known. These figures indicate that as countries develop from extreme poverty to medium income they pollute more and more but after this pollution levels fall – to the level they had before they started developing.

As I write the following are facts: more than half of sub-Saharan Africa's 600 million people live on less than US\$1 a day, more than 28 million Africans are living with HIV/AIDS and forty per cent of children in Africa do not go to school.

Clearly we face huge problems which, morally, we must overcome. If environmental thought is to be put forward as a solution to the problems of society, or if it is the code to which we must adhere whilst overcoming these problems, then we must be sure that it holds water.

I do not believe that it is morally conscionable that having attained standard of living that we enjoy in the West that we deny that level of development to others. I believe that what the world needs, and needs urgently, is real development. I also believe that targets for development should aim to match the standards of the West. I also believe that almost no-one is arguing for this.

David O'Toole, August 2003

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