

Preface: Robbing Nature's Bank

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[Note: Published posthumously in the Spring 2011 SEJournal, this is Bill's preface to Atrophy of Vigilance as he wrote it.]

May 14, 2009. Yesterday, my doctors told me that I have a rare and usually fatal cancer, meaning that I don't know how much time I have left on this earth. By about 2:00 this morning, I had decided that one of the things I want to do with that time is to finish this book about the earth, and about what we humans are doing to it.

I have spent about thirty-five years in studying relationships between humans and the environment. For at least half of that time, I have been increasingly bothered by an assumption that seems to permeate almost all environment-society writing — and that is clearly wrong. My goal, during whatever time I have left, is to spell out the reality of the situation as clearly as I know how.

As will be spelled out more fully in the following pages, that assumption goes by several names, ranging from “the Tragedy of the Commons” to the “IPAT equation.” The common theme in all of them is the assumption of rough proportionality between levels of environmental harm and levels of economic activity — that there are too many of us and that we all use too much.

In some senses, that view has to be true. There are over 300 million residents of the United States alone, and 300 million multiplied times almost anything will wind up being a pretty big number. We should all recycle, and do a better job of insulating our homes, and do more walking and less driving. With all due respect to the many authors who have worked so hard on all the other books in the “environment” sections of bookstores, though, even if all of us were to do our best to take on the “X simple things I can do to save the earth,” we would scarcely put a dent in the bigger problem. As I will spell out in later chapters, the things we can do as individuals wind up missing about 90% of all environmental problems. Yes, I mean that literally — about 90% of the problems. The reason that most of us still don't know that is that we've never really stopped to see the bigger picture. My hope is that this book can paint that picture clearly enough to help everyone to keep it in focus over the years ahead.

If you pay careful attention the next time some politicians intone, solemnly, that they don't accept that old assumption about a need for tradeoffs between economic growth and environmental protection, you'll notice something strange. Quite a few of them will then go on, in the next sentence or three, to say that they oppose one environmental policy or another precisely because (they claim) it would in fact involve such a tradeoff, being harmful for “jobs” or “the economy.” You will also notice that organized interest groups are forever attacking environmentalists for not caring a bit about jobs and working people — and environmentalists will often respond, indignantly but ineffectively, that they are, too, concerned about jobs. As will become clear in the following pages, I have learned a great deal from my fellow academics, but on this point, they are no better.

Instead, they write learned commentaries, noting that one such dispute or another is “proof” that capitalism cannot coexist with environmental quality, or that it illustrates what one respected book called “the enduring conflict” between environment and economy. Liberals and conservatives may not agree on much, but ironically, with some variations, they do both tend to agree on this particular package of erroneous assumptions. Politically conservative commentators tend to see the creation of environmental harms as being an unfortunate but necessary side effect of prosperity, meaning that environmental protection is too expensive to be affordable — and that environmentalists just don't care about the economy.

Critical or leftist commentators generally share the view that environmental protection is expensive, differing only in seeing environmental damage as additional evidence of the drawbacks of capitalism. Although nearly everyone agrees on the supposed conflict between “jobs” and the environment, however, that expectation has everything going for it except one. At least in every case where someone has managed to look at the actual numbers, the expectation has proved to be dead wrong.

This book, accordingly, is intended to let out the truth about a little-known secret. The most environmentally damaging activities tend to have had an actual economic importance that is almost vanishingly small. The dirtiest industries of the economy aren't found on the cutting edge of the economy — they're closer to the manufacturers of buggy whips — and if the dirtiest few firms within those industries were “only” as bad as the average or median firms in their own industries, the total amounts of pollution from the dirtiest industries in the economy could be reduced by anywhere from 60-95%, depending on the industry in question. If the findings are that clear, why don't we do something about it? Partly because the heavy polluters certainly wouldn't have any reason to bring the facts to our attention — and partly because the rest of us still assume that what we face is a “Tragedy of the Commons,” and that we're all more or less equally responsible for environmental problems.

For years, major polluters have defended themselves by claiming that they bring vital economic benefits to the economy as a whole — and even environmental thinkers who are otherwise very smart have usually gone along with those claims. In fact, the big polluters' actual “contributions” to the economy have been more or less in line with the “benefits” that could have been delivered by a string of bank robberies. A few people really do make out like bandits, but for the economy as a whole, the net effect is more likely to be negative — and I mean negative economically, as well as environmentally.

The process amounts to the removal of money from the many, for the benefit of the few. In the name of helping “the economy,” those few bandits are robbing nature's bank, and the rest of us — along with our children, and with the environment — wind up being poorer as a result. [To be finished later...]

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