

XV. Humanity and Nature

AIT: “We are witnessing an unprecedented and massive collision between our civilization and the Earth.” (*AIT*, p. 214)

Comment: Gore illustrates this statement with a two-page photograph of a garbage-strewn refuse dump in Mexico City. He implies that mankind is trashing the planet, literally and figuratively. But is a refuse heap representative of Mexico City, and is Mexico City representative of “our civilization”? There is a touch of misanthropy in Gore’s presentation, as if blight and swill were the hallmarks of mankind’s interaction with nature.

AIT: “The first [factor transforming mankind’s relationship with the Earth] is the population explosion, which in many ways is a success story in that death rates and birth rates are going down everywhere in the world, and families on average are getting smaller. But even though these hoped-for developments have been taking place more rapidly than anyone would have anticipated a few decades ago, the momentum in world population has built up so powerfully that the ‘explosion’ is still taking place and continues to transform our relationship to the planet.” (*AIT*, p. 216)

Comment: Gore sees “success” in the reduction of birth and death rates and average family size, not in the fossil-energy-based civilization that has enabled mankind to increase its numbers from roughly 1 billion people at the dawn of the industrial revolution to 6.5 billion people today. Environmental journalist Gregg Easterbrook noticed the negative tone of Gore’s discussion of population growth in the film version of *AIT*:

The former vice president clicks up a viewgraph showing the human population has grown more during his lifetime than in all previous history combined. He looks at the viewgraph with aversion, as if embarrassed by humanity’s proliferation. Population growth is a fantastic achievement—though one that engenders problems we must fix, including inequality and greenhouse gases.¹

Population growth is not the only “fantastic achievement” of the past two centuries that would be unthinkable in a world without fossil fuels. Others include the alleviation of poverty and hunger, the doubling of human life-spans, and the democratization of consumer goods, literacy, leisure, and personal mobility. *AIT* depicts fossil fuels solely as sources of “global warming pollution.” It is well to remember that, without abundant, affordable energy, the mass of mankind might still be mired in slavery and serfdom, as Bjorn Lomborg intimates:

If we think for a moment of the energy we use in terms of “servants,” each with the same work power as a human being, each person in Western Europe has access to 150 servants, in the U.S. about 300, and even in India

each person has 15 servants to help along. It is indeed unpleasant to imagine what it would be like to live without these helpers.²

AIT: “The way we treat forests is a political issue. This is the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Haiti has one set of policies; the Dominican Republic another.” The accompanying photograph shows a barren treeless landscape on the Haitian side of the border and lush green forest cover on the Dominican side. (*AIT*, pp. 222-223)

Comment: The photograph also illustrates Berkeley professor Jack Hollander’s thesis that “poverty, not affluence, is the environment’s number one enemy.”³ The per capita income of the Dominican Republic is more than four times that of Haiti.⁴ Desperately poor people live too close to the edge of subsistence to safeguard the health and beauty of their surroundings. There is a serious risk, never acknowledged by *AIT*, that environmental stewardship would decline in a world made poorer by political constraints on energy use.

AIT: “Much of the forest destruction comes from burning. Almost 30% of the CO₂ released into the atmosphere each year is a result of the burning of brushland for subsistence agriculture and wood fires used for cooking.” (*AIT*, p. 227)

Comment: Increased access to fossil energy, especially grid-based electricity, would reduce developing countries’ use of fuel wood, benefiting both people and the planet. As atmospheric scientist John Christy, a former African missionary, explains:

I always thought that if each home could be fitted with an electric light bulb and a microwave oven electrified by a coal-fired power plant, several good things would happen. The women [who currently spend much of their time gathering and hauling wood from the forests] would be freed to work on other more productive pursuits, the indoor air quality would be much cleaner so health would be improve, food could be prepared more safely, there would be light for reading and advancement, information through television or radio could be received, and the forest with its beautiful ecosystem could be saved.⁵

The Kyoto “process” aims to suppress fossil energy use, initially in industrialized countries but eventually in all countries. At what point in their development does Mr. Gore think it is appropriate for today’s energy-poor countries to begin limiting their people’s access to fossil fuels?

AIT: “But we now have the power to divert giant rivers according to our design instead of nature’s. When we divert too much water without regard to nature, rivers sometimes no longer reach the sea. The former Soviet Union diverted water from two mighty rivers in central Asia that fed the Aral Sea (the Amu Darya and Syr Darya)...The entire Aral Sea is now, essentially, gone.” (*AIT*, pp. 240-245)



Stranded boat on the Aral Sea

Comment: These statements raise a question about how seriously Gore takes his own doomsday scenario. Let us recapitulate Gore’s threat assessment:

- The same type of meltwater pools that formed on top of the Larson B ice shelf prior to its collapse are forming in increasing numbers on the top of the Greenland Ice Sheet.
- The meltwater pools and streams tunnel down to the bedrock, fracturing and lubricating the ice mass.
- Half or more of the ice sheet could break apart and slide into the sea, inundating low-lying States like Florida and the world’s great coastal cities.

If Gore really believes the Greenland Ice Sheet is on the brink of collapse, why does he call for measures that can have no discernible effect on glacial dynamics for decades to come? Remember, the Kyoto Protocol would not actually cool the planet; it would merely slow—by an undetectably small amount—the projected rate of warming. Over the next quarter century or longer, Gore’s “solutions”—emissions trading, energy efficiency standards, renewable energy mandates, carpooling, eating less meat, etc.—would not eliminate or even shrink a single meltwater pool, stream, or tunnel supposedly undermining the glacier’s structural integrity *today*.

Structural problems call for engineering solutions. Mankind, as Gore points out, has the power to divert mighty rivers and efface giant water bodies. So why doesn’t he call for feasibility studies and pilot projects to determine whether engineers could divert some of the meltwater allegedly destabilizing the glacier? I suspect it’s because a threat assessment dire enough to justify engineering projects to “Save the Ice Sheet” would not survive public scrutiny.

¹ Gregg Easterbrook, “Ask Mr. Science: The Moral Flaws in Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth,” *Slate*, May 24, 2006, <http://www.slate.com/id/2142319>.

² Lomborg, *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 119.

³ Jack M. Hollander, *The Real Environmental Crisis: Why Poverty, Not Affluence, Is the Environment's Number One Enemy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁴ CIA *World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>.

⁵ Testimony of John Christy, *Kyoto Global Warming Treaty's Impact on Ohio's Coal Dependent Communities*, House Committee on Resources, May 13, 2002.