

COMMENTARY

Earth Day: What should humanity do to save the planet?

Control our population

By Paul Ehrlich

Earth Day 1990 is much more than the 20th anniversary of the first nationwide event of the environmental movement. This time, it represents the start of the most critical decade in human history — arguably the decade of civilization's last chance.

In the welter of discussions of recycling, solar power, climate change, ozone depletion and so on, we must not lose sight of the roots of the environmental crisis. Those roots can be found in the scale of human activities.

The impact of the human population on its environment is roughly the product of the number of people, their per-capita level of affluence or consumption, and the environmental damage done by technologies. All three factors must be reduced if we are to preserve a decent world for our grandchildren.

Shrinking the human population will be tough because it goes against both the message encoded in our genes and long cultural tradition. There is a gigantic lag time in controlling population, humanely by limiting births, and action should have begun decades ago.

Curbing excessive consumption will be difficult, especially in the United States. But we're going to have to become more frugal, like it or not. Controlling dangerous technologies should prove the easiest. The burdens, like the costs of giving up coal-burning, must be shared.

Earth Day 1990 can mark the start of all this, bringing the world's people together to begin solving the greatest problem ever faced by humanity.

Paul Ehrlich is professor of population studies at Stanford University.

Saving Earth, freedom

By William Ruckelshaus

While the great enterprise of environmental protection that we began in earnest 20 years ago is far from complete, neither have the last 20 years been wasted. The proof of that is apparent in the catastrophe

both from the lifestyle pollution of the developed world and the struggles of the developing four-fifths of humanity.

The next 20 years of environmental progress will see us turning toward the creation of novel means of dealing with this set of challenges. The great question is whether we have the wisdom to do this in the context of free institutions, or whether we will delay until a crisis forces us to choose between a free society and unacceptable degradation.

William Ruckelshaus, a former Environmental Protection Agency chief, is chairman of Browning-Ferris Industries Inc.

Let the market save us

By Fred Smith and Dan McInnis

Earth Day 1990 promises to be a replay of Earth Day 1970. The message hasn't changed: Man and markets threaten Mother Earth. There are too many of us, and we consume too much of almost everything. Such thinking produced the Environmental Protection Agency and laws trying to control almost every economic activity. Theoretically, nothing can be built, marketed or researched without the EPA's permission.

Earth Day 1990 promoters continue to believe that private rights and market forces are the cause of environmental problems. They still are calling for stronger laws and more powerful bureaucracies. They still argue for massive "back to nature" reforms. They still see disasters everywhere. But the lifting of the Iron Curtain has shown that political control is no environmental panacea. Far from it. Absent private property and individual freedom, neither man nor nature is safe.

On Earth Day, let us reconsider launching an effort to empower people to address environmental problems directly. After all, where markets have existed, the ecology has flourished. Because they are privately owned, many forests and oyster beds in the United States are not being depleted. Private fishing clubs protect stream quality in Britain. Texas ranchers now raise endangered black rhinos. Owners become powerful stewards.

Why not extend ownership to more environmental resources? Behind every environmental resource — tree, elephant, stream, airspace — should stand an owner able to protect it.

Fred Smith, a former EPA senior policy analyst, heads the Competitive Enterprise Institute. Dan McInnis heads the Earth Day Alternatives project at the Institute.

Needed: global action

By Ronald Dellums

Twenty years ago, individuals concerned about the plight of our planet organized civic events, teach-ins and demonstrations that would transcend national and ideological boundaries as well as economic and linguistic limitations. It was also the year I first ran for the U.S. Congress, as an anti-war and pro-environmental candidate. I adopted as my campaign colors black (for my African-American heritage) and green (the common color of the global environmental movement).

Now, 20 years later, what began as a campaign for clean air and water and for the use of renewable resources has mushroomed into a global campaign to save, literally, the planet.

Acid rain, ozone depletion of our atmosphere, global warming, the losses of forests and species are only part of the emerging global crisis. Urban residents of all races and economic conditions also have much to fear from toxic wastes and decaying infrastructures, such as dilapidated housing with cracking asbestos insulation and outmoded, polluting heating sources, and water and sewer systems that urgently need replacing.

The Earth is humanity's sole vehicle. Government and international institutions have too often been remiss or dilatory in confronting these ever-worsening problems. What is needed is a critical-mass marshaling of scientific, human and fiscal resources on an international level to seek long-term solutions to our food, energy, transportation and shelter needs that will ensure a better quality of life.

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over vast reaches of Eastern Europe. We read about people lining up to breathe the filtered air for 15 minutes a day and we say, "It could never happen here." But it very nearly did.

We, too, had black skies, burning, poisonous rivers, choking smog and dying wildlife. The difference is, we did something about it. We passed laws to protect the environment and established an apparatus, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, to enforce them. And we spent money to get those problems under social control.

With this record, one would think we would confront the environmental problems of the present with confidence. But, remarkably, we do not. As we approach a new generation of environmental problems, we treat them with disdain and abuse.

This may make good politics, but it is patently not the way to deal with environmental protection. For the developed nations, the urgent problems are of two types: first, pervasive and intractable pollution that arises directly from our transportation, energy use, land use and waste disposal, and second, assaults that result