

The following is a review of Volume 1 of *Environmental Practice* that appeared in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, London, May 12, 2000. It is reprinted with permission.

## Silence About a Destructive Power

John Whitelegg

This journal is aimed very specifically at environmental practitioners in the US. The contents range from the ephemeral and anecdotal (the size of the swimming pool at the next conference and who has been accepted into the ranks of environmental professionals in Florida or North Carolina) to the consideration of important and practical scientific issues relevant to the jobs that these environmental professionals have to do when they go to work on a Monday morning. This range and rootedness gives the journal a flavour and strength unusual in environmental journals.

The first four issues (volume one) set the distinctive style of the journal. Each has a theme: "Wetland impacts in environmental impact statements," "Stream water quality assessment in the Ukraine," "Ecoregion framework for management," and "Burned riparian zone shows dangers of hydrocarbon transport." They reveal a welcome interest in the environmental problems of the former USSR and a number of strong articles on water quality and water management.

There are also some worrying eccentricities for an environmental journal. The first issue contains a guest editorial by Thomas Cuba, "Reflections on sustainable development." Here, in the opening issue, was an opportunity to spell out exactly how US environmental professionals are tackling the interpretation and delivery of sustainable development. The result is surprising, especially as Cuba is the chair of the sustainable development working group of the National Association of Environmental Professionals (NAEP). His position is very simple: sustainable development will never occur, and he and his colleagues cannot find any example of it anywhere.

What is worrying about a journal that runs this material without an alternative per-

spective is that at best it fundamentally misunderstands sustainable development and at worst it represents a high-level, deliberate professional rejection of a major underlying principle of environmental intervention. Sustainable development is discussed without one mention of global issues or of the role of the US—which accounts for 25 per cent of greenhouse gas production with 5 per cent of the world's population—in helping or hindering progress towards global sustainability.

Even more surprising is that there is no mention of the progress being made in the US following on new legislation that encourages public transport (transit) and the development of alternatives to the car. This really is news, though the effect is small-scale and has to survive within a land-use and fiscal system that elevates non-sustainability to being a policy objective. Why does Cuba not even attempt to identify what is non-sustainable as part of his denial of sustainability?

Sustainability is attacked once more in the article by Robert Lackey ("The savvy salmon technocrat: life's little rules"), under the heading, "Avoid the allure of junk science and policy babble." The discussion is dismissive in the extreme and fails to recognise the importance and utility of concepts such as environmental capacity, critical thresholds and long-term system maintenance. Cuba and Lackey are characteristic of other papers in this journal. The US is a huge consumer of energy and materials and of land and air hydrocarbon transport. It is the biggest player in the expansion of aviation, and aviation is the fastest-growing contributor to greenhouse gases and climate change. The environmental problems that flow from the US lifestyle are global, as well as local, and yet they receive no coverage at all in the first year of this journal. That there are links between lifestyle and sustainability is just not recognised.

This is not a trivial criticism. There is obviously a problem for environmental professionals in the US in seeing such links. How do US environmental professionals pro-

pose to deal with the root cause of global environmental problems? What do they think about the global role of the US, which sends out the strongest possible advertising message in support of consumption, a message that is being received loud and clear in India and throughout Southeast Asia? What does the US environmental professional do when working on World Bank projects that are encouraging motorised and fossil-fuel transport around the world? *Environmental Practice* is silent on all these big issues.

This silence sits very uncomfortably with the strong ethical statement published in the journal and designed to inform the work of the NAEP and its journal. The statement itself is splendid and noticeably absent from UK environmental organisations and publications. The "code of ethics and standards of practice for environmental professionals" is reproduced in each issue of the journal and commits environmental professionals in their personal and professional lives to honesty, justice, integrity, fidelity, fairness and impartiality. Moreover, environmental professionals will "interest themselves in public welfare" and "be ready to apply their special knowledge for the benefit of mankind and their environment."

The difficulty comes with the fact that the US has a long history of locating environmentally damaging facilities near poor residential areas and/or areas inhabited by Afro-Caribbean and Hispanic communities. Incinerators, waste dumps, freeways and such are more likely to end up in such an area than they are in the affluent suburbs of Washington DC or Orange County in California. This is an ethical issue. The US government is funding a transport consultancy in Calcutta that is targeting the existing train system for closure and replacing it with an expensive transit system that will be unaffordable for the travelling public. It will provide business opportunities for corporate America, but it will damage the interests of women and children in Calcutta who currently find the trams a pleas-

ant and affordable option to an unpleasant set of alternatives. This, too, is an ethical issue.

The NAEP's ethical objectives are tough, and it has not delivered on them. Indeed, its journal lends credibility to attacks on sustainability and denies the importance of people and localities in US professional environmental thinking. It is typical that the last page of volume one encourages US environmental professionals to go to a conference in Sweden in July 2000 and, having flown to Copenhagen, to rent a car so as to "be one of the first people to experience the new bridge connecting Sweden with the rest of Europe." Those European environmental professionals who worked for five years to point out the enormous environmental damage this bridge will cause will no doubt feel rewarded to know that it will give their US colleagues a pleasant driving experience on their way to discuss "how a green corporate philosophy can have a positive effect on profitability and stock value."

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A Reply to John Whitelegg: Silence About a Destructive Power

In the referenced article, John Whitelegg lambasts the United States environmental profession, *Environmental Practice* as a publication, and several of the authors personally. I acknowledge his opinion and thank the editor for this opportunity to reply.

As a basis for you the reader to ascertain why two professionals may have two so widely variant points of view, I offer this. From the byline, Whitelegg is a university professor. I am not. I have worked for sixteen years implementing environmental

practice at the building permit level. The federal government, university research, and the philosophical thoughts of the great thinkers all place sustainable development within reach. At the level where a city official issues a permit to put a house on a lot in a subdivision, the tenets are untenable. This is my experience.

The reason I wrote the editorial ("Reflections on Sustainable Development," *Environmental Practice*, March 1999) in the first place was to illuminate this gap between esoteric thought and the implementable reality of daily life: to make people think. I wanted to make sure people knew that the theory of sustainable development has not yet been put into practice. But all is not gloom and doom. Improvements have been made. Are they sustainable improvements? Only time will tell.

The citations of success made by Whitelegg are valid, but only as indications of movement towards, not achievement of, global sustainability, and only within the limited confines of the parameters chosen: greenhouse gasses etc. The sustainability of even this advance is at risk as only this year the legislature of Florida eliminated the emissions inspections for our automobiles. This at a time when the air around Tampa Bay is still visibly orange. The sustainability of the air quality improvements in Florida has failed. This was and is the crux of my position. Development is an act of change. Sustainable is an adjective defining that act as being perpetual. It may be sustainable through the continued efforts of the creator (maintenance-driven sustainability) or it may be sustainable internally (autonomic). The latter class of developments has no representatives and the former has no assurance that the maintenance effort will continue.

Finally, the editorial simply said that we were not aware of any truly sustainable developments. None have been offered for consideration by the readership. I eagerly look forward to the day I can retract my statements and modify my position.

*Thomas R. Cuba, PhD, CEP  
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### Silence About a Destructive Power?

Professor Whitelegg has a good point; several of them. I too, as many of our members, am concerned about sustainable cultures and sustainable communities. However I join many others who believe that the term "sustainable development" is an oxymoron. He certainly has many good points about the need for the members of our profession to take active roles in bettering the world condition. But I believe he misses the point with his diatribe about the "last page of volume one." Yes, we were trying to encourage corporate environmental professionals to participate in a workshop on environmental management. His readers might have been better served, however, had he made reference to the first paragraph about the Summit. It read:

The rise of a true global economy has challenged companies that conduct business on a world scale. One such challenge: to establish and implement corporate environmental policies across jurisdictions whose governmental, economic and cultural differences are as vast as the oceans that separate them. But with the challenge comes a new and rare opportunity: to provide leadership and direction in developing global environmental policy and management strategies. The Sweden 2000 Environmental Summit will provide a forum for individuals charged with worldwide corporate environmental responsibilities to share their experiences and to shape the future course of corporate environmental decision-making.

We believe that corporate environmental planners, more than most any other discipline around the world, can and do have direct effects on global environmental quality! We believe it is their responsibility both to their stockholders and to the public in general to take every step they can to implement positive environmental policies. We believe that it is their responsibility to act in ways that will benefit the public and NOT create more examples of environmental inequity.

But enough of the big picture.

Professor Whitelegg seems to be rather piqued about the suggestion we made that