

The Media and the Environment

IN late May of 2004 the *New York Times* published a weak mea culpa for its dismal reporting on George Bush's idiotic adventure in Iraq. The sad thing was that its coverage had been much better than the average in the mainstream U.S. media. We felt that time had come for that newspaper to publish a similar statement on its grossly inadequate treatment of environmental issues, so in early June we submitted the "OP ED" reprinted below. Needless to say it was not published. In the short time since, things have gotten even worse and the *Times* and its cohorts spent a week canonizing Ronald Reagan, the second worst President the United States has ever had (Bush II has, to everyone's amazement, captured the number one position). While there was occasional mention of Reagan's sleazy foreign policy moves and his war on the poor, his moves to destroy the environment were universally ignored. We should all recall that he appointed James Watt his Secretary of the Interior, a religious crazy who believed the "rapture" was so imminent that there was no need to protect Earth's life support systems. Watt later barely avoided a jail sentence for his corrupt acts while in office.

One of the biggest problems environmental scientists face is the increasingly concentrated corporate control of the media. That is control by people who believe there is no harm done (and lots of money for them to make) by plundering our planet. Right now the internet allows some information to flow rather freely — but how long that will last is anyone's guess. We must all do what we can to inform people that humanity is more than ever on a collision course with its life-support systems.

THE TIMES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Paul and Anne Ehrlich

Over the last few decades the *Times* has done better than most newspapers at covering environmental issues. Its *Science* section, for example, has led the journalistic profession in accurately reporting the consensus of the scientific community on issues of climate change. But the seriousness of the overall environmental situation has never been adequately covered in the *Times* or the

rest of the press. The landmark 1993 *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity* and *Statement by Fifty-Eight of the World's Scientific Academies*, outlining a consensus of the world's best scientists that "human beings and the natural world are on a collision course," were all but ignored. The fundamental problem of the decay of the ecosystem services essential to the human economy — climate control, pollination, recycling of nutrients, and all the rest — receives essentially no attention. The extinction of species is covered, but the loss of *populations* of other organisms, which are crucial to providing those services, is almost never mentioned. Do many *Times* readers realize that, as stated in this week's *Science* magazine: "Within the next 50 to 100 years, support and maintenance of an extended human family of 8 to 11 billion people will become difficult at best"?

Even in isolation, many key environmental issues and connections do not get adequate attention in the media, the *Times* included. For example, the connection between human population growth and the probability of novel epidemics is rarely examined. Ever larger groups of people are coming into intimate contact with wildlife that harbors disease organisms capable of transferring into the human population. That increases the odds both of a transfer and of diseases new to humans, like AIDS, persisting and spreading. And even the *Times* has not reminded readers often enough of the very direct connection between expanding human numbers and the possibility of catastrophic climate change.

While the problems of continuing population growth, even at lower rates than those that recently prevailed, are widely recognized, expanding consumption among the rich is almost never discussed as a major threat to humanity's life-support systems. Global ecological damage today is especially tightly tied to the consumption of oil and other fossil fuels. American military adventures in the Middle East thus take on an especially ironic cast, set as they are against a desert backdrop that is partially a product of historic environmental deterioration that helped doom Mesopotamian civilizations. Americans and Iraqis are dying as the Bush administration attempts to assure flows of oil to nations that decades ago

should have listened to their scientific communities and begun a transition away from overdependence on it.

Too often, on business pages and in the minds of politicians, increased consumption is viewed as a panacea for economic woes. Much more coverage is needed of issues such as how overconsumption can be measured, how it most reasonably can be curbed among the rich, and how consumption can be *increased* among the very poor. Switching from income taxes to consumption taxes is long overdue. People need to be better informed of the views of ecologists and economists on the need for carbon and gasoline taxes — and for recycling the revenues to reduce regressive taxes to protect those with lower incomes. Where are the prominent articles reporting the views of those who think the American "way of life," designed around addiction to gas guzzlers and other forms of energy profligacy, *must* become negotiable if our grandchildren are to have a chance at decent lives? Where are the editorials about redesigning our country around people instead of cars?

Decades ago a prominent newspaper editor argued with us that he did not want his reporters to be knowledgeable about science because it would "bias their coverage." Fortunately, some reporters nonetheless have educated themselves on the subtleties of environmental science. More editors could do so, and the *Times* should lead the way. With the sustainability of civilization at stake, we don't need another too-little-too-late mea culpa such as followed America's best newspaper's failure to thoroughly investigate the debacle in Iraq.

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