

# Conservation is not enough

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Economic development has become the overriding priority of almost every government in the last fifty years. Over this period, social and ecological imperatives have been the ruthlessly and systematically subordinated. As economic development has gone out of control, the pressures on the natural world have become immense. In fact, "free trade" and economic development are fundamentally in conflict with environmental conservation. We need to oppose the new World Trade Organization and the various free trade treaties such as the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT Uruguay Rounds), because once these have been set in place, there can be no environmental conservation. Conservation, as we know it, is not enough.

Key words: Conservation, World Trade, General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, Economic Development.

**W**HY should we have to devote so much time and energy to conserving the natural world with its forests, mountains, free-flowing rivers and the myriad forms of life that inhabit them, or for that matter our architectural heritage in our towns and cities?

To do so against an invading army would be understandable, but why should we have to do so against ourselves? The truth is that we have developed a very destructive type of society, and it is getting more destructive by the day. Indeed, it is probable that we have wrought more damage to the delicate fabric of the natural world in the last 50 years, than during the rest of our tenancy of this planet. Consider that 50 years ago most of the countries of Southeast Asia were 50–80% forested. Today there is very little left of natural forests, covering less than 10% of the Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand, while deforestation is proceeding at an unprecedented rate in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Burma.

The reason is that it is in the last 50 years that economic development has become the overriding priority of just about every government on earth, and economic development is unfortunately a very destructive process. Indeed, conservation involves above all keeping things we cherish from being commoditized, i.e., transformed into the raw materials of the development process. This is precisely what we do when we persuade our government to classify an important area of wilderness as a national park.

Unfortunately economic development is today totally out of control. It must continually expand to satisfy the requirements of the corporations — the principal actors — and also to prevent the economy from collapsing. This means that national parks are constantly under developmental pressure. Increasingly, logging, road building and mining are being allowed to occur within their boundaries. For instance, in India's famous Siriska tiger reserve there are now more than 100

illegal stone quarries in operation (Bittu Sahgal, pers. comm.). Environmentalists have won lawsuits to have them closed down, but the judges' decisions are never implemented. It is generally recognized that the future of national parks in India and probably everywhere else is fairly grim. On the basis of the dynamics of our modern industrial society, everything that can serve as a resource for the developmental process must be allowed to do so; and what is more the return on every resource must be maximized in the interest of economic efficiency.

Today this developmental pressure on our national parks can only increase, and very dramatically at that, with the move towards "Free Trade", which is best seen as a state of affairs where social and ecological imperatives are ruthlessly and systematically subordinated to the requirements of development. This inevitably creates highly competitive conditions, and if rich countries can hope to compete with Third World countries like India and China, where labour costs are 10–20 times lower, they must become ultra-efficient. This means reducing wages — a process that is well under way in the industrial world. It also means dismantling the welfare state, which is seen as a tax on labour, and also repealing those environmental regulations that environmentalists have fought for over the past decades. Clearly, if we are to compete with India and China we simply cannot afford such "luxuries". What is more, even if we do not do so voluntarily, such measures will be imposed on us by the various free trade treaties that have recently been signed, such as the North American Free Trade Alliance, (NAFTA), the European Common Market, whose political and legal framework has been provided by the Maastricht Treaty, and above all the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT Uruguay Rounds), which is to be implemented by a new powerful international body called the World Trade Organization. On the basis of laws enacted by those who govern

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these bodies, a large proportion of environmental controls are now to be classified as barriers to trade and thus regarded as illegal (Goldsmith 1994). Already Indonesia's ban on the export of raw logs in 1985 has been judged illegal by the GATT. The ban has been rescinded in 1992 which has resulted in a dramatic increase in illegal log exports (Lang and Hines 1993). Canada's restrictions on the export of unprocessed herring and salmon, which were an essential part of that country's West Coast Fisheries Conservation and Management Scheme, was judged illegal by the GATT (Lang and Hines 1993).

A Dutch government move to ban the import of unsustainable logged timber, a move that probably would have been emulated by a number of other European measures, is unlikely to be implemented, as the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs considers that it would be incompatible with the GATT regulations (Lang and Hines 1993).

The European Union has recently published a list of US environmental laws that it believes can be successfully challenged as illegal on the basis of GATT regulations. This includes the Corporate Average Fuel Economy regulations and the Gas Guzzler taxes, the object of which is to encourage the production of small, fuel efficient cars. Also included are the *Marine Mammal Protection Act*, which limits the numbers of dolphins that can be killed while fishing for tuna, for any country that exports tuna to the US, the *Nuclear Nonproliferation Act* and a host of food safety and agriculture

health and safety laws, including rules on food safety inspections, zero pesticide residue standards and rules on inspection for bovine spongiform encephalopathy (European Union Targets US Environmental Laws under Proposed GATT? World Trade Organization — Sierra Club Press Release, May 31st, 1994). It is now considered that as much as 85% of America's environmental laws could be judged illegal on the basis of one or other of the free trade treaties to which that country is party. The same is probably true of the environmental legislation of the other countries that have signed such treaties.

The truth of the matter is that once it has been decided that the expansion of world trade and the economic development that this must foster are the overriding goals of a public policy to which all other considerations, whether social, ecological or moral must be ruthlessly subordinated, there can be no environmental conservation. It must follow that conservation as we know it is not enough. Conservationists must unite and fight global free trade and other economic developments that make effective conservation impossible.

## REFERENCES

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