

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING Peter Schwartzman

Human rights, environmental quality, a connection?

What are rights? I take them to be a set of entitlements that humans collectively decide to grant on the basis of a sense of fairness, equality, or responsibility. In this context, then, rights come from the people and, therefore, are an outcome of continual negotiation. And it is this negotiation that implicates and obligates all of us to think about, reaffirm or reconstitute the current slate of human rights.

In the last several hundred years, we have seen major commitments made to human rights. For the most part this has been done through the agency of individual countries who serve as the purveyors and protectors of rights. Consider the rights accorded by the U.S. Constitution (freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, etc.) or India's Constitution (right to equality, right against exploitation, freedom of religion, etc.). Yet, more recently, groups of nations have decided to collectively define and affirm individual rights. World War II's reminder of the potential savagery of humanity impelled nations to think broadly and collectively about human rights. The outcome of the ensuing discussion, namely, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was adopted and proclaimed by the UN General Assembly on December 10, 1948. It granted a plethora of human rights in its thirty Articles—including, "no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms" (Article 4) and "no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" (Article 5). Follow-ups to this document have focused on the less powerful and more easily oppressed members of the world, namely children and women. All of these efforts serve as evidence that human civilization has made great strides to affirm human rights the world over.

Yet, while we should acknowledge and celebrate these steps towards a more equitable and peaceful world, we cannot overlook the fact that serious violations of human rights still exist today. For instance, according to Kevin Bales, a British sociologist, almost 30,000,000 people currently live in slave conditions, including close to 200,000 in the United States and Europe! And while millions and millions of the world's citizens use grotesque amounts of fresh water for seemingly superfluous tasks, more than 1,000,000,000 people lack access to safe water. And, amazingly, in 2004, nearly one third of humans still don't have access to adequate sanitation (Gleick). Concerning another resource, while we are able to gorge ourselves with thousands of different types of foods in nearly unlimited quantities at virtually anytime of the year, nearly a billion people are still suffering from chronic malnutrition, one of the most devastating disorders known to humans. What makes these violations of human rights even more

saddening is the recognition that nearly all of them are avoidable and preventable. Clearly, there has to be a better, more effective way to affirm, promote and protect human rights.

Recognizing that the protection of human rights needs expansion and higher levels of engagement compels us to search for new ways of thinking about rights. Perhaps if we connect human rights with environmental rights, we may be able to promote and protect both more adequately. As it turns out, this is exactly what some are beginning to do and early indications are that it works.

What do human rights have to do with environmental well-being in the first place? Let's examine a few of the many connections between environmental health and the affirmation and promotion of human rights. First, if human rights are what we are after, the protection of the environment is an essential component. Human well-being is intrinsically dependant on the maintenance of a healthy environment because humans literally consume the environment constantly. Clear air, one of the most underrated resources, requires the existence of biological producers of oxygen. Healthy food requires soils that haven't been contaminated with pesticides or heavy metals. All of us depend on these and other ecological services to survive.

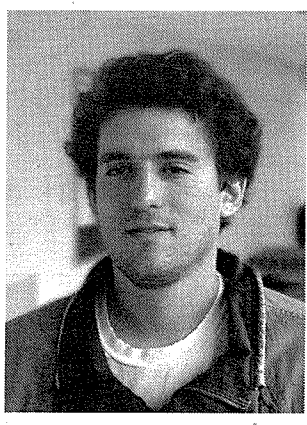
Second, with all the suffering going on in human populations the world over, it may be necessary to rectify these horrors before addressing contemporaneous environmental tragedies, such as the mass extinction of flora and fauna or the prospects of global warming. Is it right to protect the Northern Spotted Owl when attention put to this matter might be better spent making sure children are immunized or fed? While the answer to this depends on who is answering it (that is, on their particular interests and predilections), one cannot but think that the eleven million children that needlessly die every year (due to preventable causes) deserve to be heard on the matter. Realistically, however, we don't need to make such trade offs, given how wealthy many parts of the world are now. Consider that the world's military budget is on the order of \$1,000,000,000,000 a year (with the U.S.'s contribution to this "fund" being six times larger than any other country's and larger than the combined military expenditures of the next twenty-five top contributors, according to the U.S. Department of Defense's own numbers). Parliaments of spotted owls and hordes of healthy children are both easily achievable if we had the will to insure them both.

Third, and very much related to the above reason, according to Amnesty International (one of the most well-respected NGOs defending human rights), there is very

good evidence suggesting that countries that respect the rights of humans (by enforcing constitutional law) also tend to have a much more favorable attitude and willingness to protect ecosystems and resources as well. Additionally, countries with an utter disrespect for its citizens' rights are much more likely have very weak environmental protections as well. Thus, in countries led by dictators, such as Burma, it is not surprising to find egregious human rights violations as well as a sincere lack of respect for natural environments.

Fourth, as obvious as it sounds and as easily as it is forgotten, humans are also part of the environment. Too often the environment is considered something separate from ourselves and others. A holistic interpretation of "the environment," one that accounts for the innumerable interconnections and interdependencies that all living and non-living things share establishes quite clearly how intertwined human rights and environmental rights must be. Thus, it is specious to claim that human rights are somehow different or detached from environmental rights.

So now that we've acknowledged the need for human rights and some of the connections between them and environmental well-being, we are prompted to ask, "What rights deserve to be protected?" A common place to start when constructing a list of rights is to begin with the various political freedoms and liberties that are protected by nation states; the U.S. Constitution largely serves this purpose. However, another approach is to focus on the basic needs of humans, which, starting with most essential, include air, water, food, shelter and energy (whereas, meaningful work, health care, and education are more likely to be considered luxuries). These five essential resources must be obtained for humans to survive. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights upholds these needs, but goes beyond as well, stating, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age..." (in Press). But despite this affirmation more than 50 years ago, as noted earlier, many humans are in severe lack the most basic resources. And when people live under a constant threat of resource insecurity (independent of the political rights they may hold), they have much less ability to think beyond the immediate. This predisposes them to partake in activities that are clearly not in their long term interests. Given that these activities often involve the taking of resources (e.g., water and wood) in unsustainable ways, we can see one major benefit of providing people basic resources from the start—the natural resource reservoirs and the life forms that inhabit areas where these resources are found have a much greater likelihood of survival. Yet, rights to these essential items are in no way independent of political rights either. Nobel Prize winning economist, Amartya Sen, notes that no famine in the twentieth century occurred in countries that were democratic. And the lack of economic and political rights also makes efforts to feed people living in countries with dictatorial governments very difficult because access to markets is often prohibited and hoarding rampant. The argument here isn't that political rights are not essential to a harmonious society,



but that economic and environmental ones are too. If we put all (or most) our eggs in the political rights basket and ignore other human rights, we are likely securing for ourselves only continued destruction of ecological services (clean water, fresh air, waste absorption, etc.) and global inequities that will harbor ill will, resentment and even terrorism. Since these

consequences are extremely dangerous to our well-being, we'd better think hard about which rights will be accorded and defended.

Organizations now exist that understand the inherent connection between human rights and environmental ones. They are at the forefront of the continued struggle to emancipate people and other living things from the tyranny of commodification and oppression. The NGO EarthRights International (webpage: www.earthrights.org) is a great example of this movement to combine these topics directly. By documenting abuses, organizing activists around rights, litigating on behalf of victims, and teaching about rights and remedies, EarthRights demands that both human rights and earth rights are protected. In less than ten years, EarthRights has blossomed into a global organization with distinguished scholarship and influence. Amnesty International and Sierra Club (one of the oldest and largest environmental organizations) recently joined forces to protect environmental leaders from human rights abuses in their "Environmentalists Under Fire" campaign. In only a few years, this campaign has brought much needed global awareness of and political influence on the offenses and the offending parties. More and more, organizations are recognizing the common interests and connections between environmental health and human rights.

What do we have to lose if we don't take an active role to insure that the rights of all humans are protected? This is a tough question without absolute answers. However, if history is a guide, we expect rulers and corporations to take advantage of people and environments to the extent they can. If these forces are not checked by a broad based citizenry that is unwavering in its demand for human and environmental rights, it isn't hard to envision a world where billions of humans remain subject to the rules and dictates of the powerful. When the limited voice of marginalized communities (i.e., the native and aboriginal) and non-human life forms is considered, we begin to understand how important it is to make sure that rights are applied as widely and fairly as possible. If the 21st Century is remembered for the one that boldly and unrelentingly protected human rights, it will have been a glorious one indeed. It is incumbent on all of us to make this dream a reality.

References

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