

Everything is environmental

I am often asked what I teach. Curious looks often accompany my response. Environmental Studies isn't a household name so lots of people don't know much about it; actually, I didn't learn about it until my early twenties. Having studied and taught the subject now for fifteen years, I have come to realize it is one of those special topics that relates to almost everything. That is, almost all the activities we engage in and the problems that we face have connections to the environment. Because of this, the environment is a very powerful lens to understand the world and our civilization. Let's look at a few examples that illustrate how inextricably connected the environment is to other, seemingly unrelated, topics.

Pet cats. Pets are wonderful and many of us enjoy them. However, stray and improperly managed animals can wreak havoc on our environment. Too many pet owners don't take the precautions needed to spade their pets (which leads to many unwanted animals) and others let their pets go outside without sufficient constraints. Cats that get outside are a particular problem.

Stray cats or those let outside temporarily can do an immense amount of damage to the environment. In 1998, it was estimated that 30-60 million stray cats lived in the United States. When cats are allowed to traipse through neighborhoods they instinctively kill song birds and their chicks. According to the National Audubon Society, approximately 100 million birds a year get killed by cats. Since song birds are having enough trouble reproducing as it is (with the prevalence of industrial chemicals and the steady reduction in habitat), it is important that people do what they can to minimize this problem.

War. War is a terrible thing for many reasons. Obviously, the killing of innocent people (who by the way typically make up the greatest number of casualties in war) is tragic. But war is a great environmental crime against humanity as well. First, it requires a tremendous amount of resources. And second, it often leaves the surrounding environment unfit for human or biological survival as well.

Thus far, the Iraq war has cost over \$400 billion. This is an astounding figure. According to the National Priorities Project, this money could have been spent to pay for any of the following: (1) 57 million kids attending Head Start for a year; (2) health insurance for 262 million children (according to a 2005 study by the State Health Access Data Assistance Center and the Urban Institute, over 8 million American children are now uninsured); (3) salaries and benefits for nearly 8 million teachers; (4) building costs for ~4 million new housing units; or, (5) the four year tuition expenses for 21 million college students (considering that there are only 17 million students currently in college, this would mean that all would go for free!). Perhaps more amazing though, \$400 billion could provide basic needs in the areas of health, education, water, sanitation, food production, and roads for *all* the world's poor for **three** years (Sachs, 2005). Environmentally, think of all the benefits that would accrue if the world's poor weren't forced (by necessity) to work in destructive industries such as charcoal production, gemstone mining, sweatshops, etc. Misallocated and misspent money is an environmental issue when so many environmental problems face humanity; how often have you heard that we can't do X or Y because it is too "expensive"?

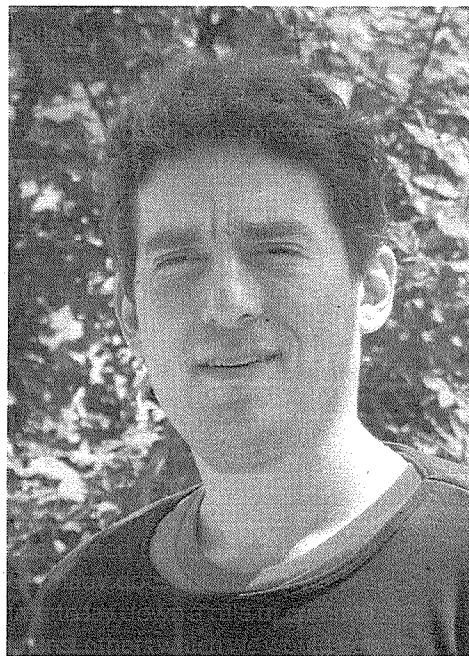
Clearly, allocating and spending so much money for bombs, destruction, and death has got to be one of the most foolish and

wasteful things humans do. For insight into the sheer lunacy of war, consider what one of our founding fathers wrote about it, way back in 1795, "Of all the enemies to public liberty war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes...known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few. ... No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare" (James Madison in *Political Observations*). I strongly believe Madison was on to something here.

War is also incredibly destructive on our planet. Even the work up to war can be immensely damaging. The world's powerful nations have tested at least 2,000 nuclear bombs since the beginning of the Cold War (with the U.S. responsible for over half of these). How much radioactive material (which was emitted by these tests) has been ingested by the world's people? We'll never know. Yet, recent estimates on the impact of one nuclear accident gone awry (Chernobyl in 1986) suggest that more than a quarter million people will ultimately die because of it. One of the greatest problems of war is that it detrimentally affects people (and other living things) for generations to come. How many U.S. soldiers are now sick from the use of depleted uranium during the last two conflicts in the Middle East? Some estimates say that more than a few hundred thousand suffer because of it (Hastings, 2006). Imagine how many innocent Kuwaiti's, Iraqi's and others downwind of the bombings have also suffered. Nuclear munitions leave nuclear waste in the soils, air and the waterways. It is very disturbing to me that an intelligent species would knowingly dig up a highly dangerous material (such as nuclear fuel) and willingly deposit it on other members of its own species.

Advertising. Our culture has become saturated with messages from advertisers. Nearly everywhere we go, we are forced slogans, ditties, and images telling us how happy we will be if we consume something some company is peddling. Have you noticed how often these images include natural backgrounds? The classic examples of advertising which exploits our inclination to desire natural landscapes and environments are commercials for jeeps and other SUVs. Apparently, many of us are more likely to buy something if we connect it with something environmentally pleasing. (Advertisers don't spend billions of dollars each year for nothing.) Unfortunately though, it is the purchase (and use) of these promoted products that spells disaster for our environment.

Most products being advertised in our media are detrimental to our environment, especially when contrasted with available alternatives. Fast food is much more harmful to our bodies than fresh, non-processed, locally-grown food. Advertised foods for kids are so packed with salt and sugar yet we wonder why many of them are becoming diabetics. Men are bombarded with more razor commercials than one could imagine. It turns out that the tried and true flat blade (or straight) razor outperforms electric and throwaway versions and lasts for decades (rather than weeks or months); it took propaganda from the "throwaway" razor industry to convince men to move away from their simple, non-electric instrument in the first place. Alcohol and tobacco commercials are alleged to have contributed to underage smoking and drinking. How many lives have been shortened due to these two vices? How many acres of land are used to grow tobacco, a crop with



no benefit to humanity? Wouldn't it be environmentally responsible to shift these wasted acres back to more natural settings? With all this evidence in hand, can't it be reasonably argued that "innocent" advertising is polluting our minds (and bodies) and propelling us to live in ways that are irresponsible and unsustainable? If so, what are we going to do about it?

The Internet. One of the most important resources to environmentalists is the information and connectivity that comes by way of the Internet. While it is certainly true that the Internet contains its share of garbage, it is also true that the Internet provides the most efficient and expedient means to obtain and share relevant and useful information. Additionally, its relatively low entry cost literally gives millions of Americans access to information that would otherwise be unavailable. However, all is not well with the Internet.

Efforts are underway to undermine access to the Internet and to limit what one can obtain from it. Many countries in the world severely restrict access to news and information websites. I hope that in the United States we would recognize these restrictions as limitations of our freedoms — particularly those connected with individual speech and the press. We've already observed that information once available to us before 9/11 is now limited afterwards on the basis of "security" concerns. Environmental toxicologist Sandra Steingraber found this out recently while researching an explosion (and subsequent fire) that occurred at a PVC plant in Illiopolis, Ill. (Given that this plant is located about 100 miles from Galesburg — as the crow flies — I wonder how many readers didn't even know this happened. For more, read her article, now located on the web at: <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/153/>) The information that Dr. Steingraber was after (such as what chemicals were located at the facility and in what quantities) should be readily available to all citizens (i.e., on the Internet), especially in the immediate aftermath of such a disaster; the fact that it wasn't (and isn't) indicates that our democracy is in serious trouble. I hope that we recognize that open access to the Internet is a prerequisite for a free society. People need to be able to access and share information with each other and with the larger community. Our environmental health and safety depend on it.

Childhood behavior. How often have you heard someone say something to the effect that, "kids are out of control these days." Some of these comments are obviously prompted by a lack of memory of the way children have always been. However, considering how many

of our children are taking medication to "fix" this or that ailment (be it a learning disability, a hyperactivity disorder, or, an anger management problem), there must exist a larger problem in our society, right? Often these "problems" are attributed to genetics or bad parenting, two things, oddly enough, that we deem curable with a pill or punishment. Yet, when one looks at the research, one can't help but notice that environmental factors have been found to play a central role a child's inability to concentrate or his/her display of hyper and even violent behavior.

We shouldn't be surprised that our children are "acting up." Given that we fill so many of them with high fructose sugars and processed foods (which metabolize extra quickly), we should expect our children to exhibit hyperactive tendencies. (To punish them after we feed them this garbage is an additional crime.) Our environments are so loaded with neurologically-impacting chemicals, it shouldn't come as a shock at all that our children are unable to focus or "compute." Thankfully we have reduced lead concentrations in children's blood substantially since the 1980's, however, levels we still observe are way too high; again, this is no surprise given that lead stays around for so long. Yet, despite all the knowledge that we have gained in the area of children's response to diet and pollutants, rarely are children given a thorough examination when they exhibit signs of difficulty learning or behaving; and even rarer are efforts made to alter diets or reduce exposure to suspected neurotoxins. The medical profession seems much more willing to provide children licit drugs to remedy their ailments; a response that makes the pharmaceutical firms very happy indeed. So next time a kid you know gets diagnosed with some "disability," at least wonder whether it might be his/her diet or environment that may to blame.

While you may not be ready to agree that "everything is environmental," hopefully you have a better idea of how such a concept can be constructed. I attribute the lack of familiarity with this concept to the utter dearth of environmental education historically in this country (and elsewhere) and the profit-centeredness of our news media. The "stories" which I have presented are ones that are available to us (via the Internet and specialized journals and books) but they aren't found on a regular basis in the mainstream. So, as long as we keep the Internet "free" and we make an effort to seek out the environmental side/spin to news, we should be able to deal with the problems we face in a more honest and informed manner.

Works Cited

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