

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

Peter Schwartzman

When should you scream "fire!"

If you are in a building and you see a fire, you have the right to scream, "Fire." In fact, you not only have the right but you have the responsibility to do so. That is, an unwillingness to scream would be considered a failure to perform one's duty to humanity. Does this apparent rule apply for other "fires"?

Many of us in the environmental arena are witnessing a mounting body of evidence pointing in the direction of a collapsing environment. Claims to this effect are no longer reserved to the fringes of society. They now include many well-known thinkers as well as large, influential organizations. According to a 572-page UN report issued last week, entitled, Global Environmental Outlook 4 (GEO-4), there are many reasons to be alarmed. Here are just a few quotations from this document which represents a 20-year follow up to the seminal Brundtland Commission's 1987 report:

- "Both indoor and outdoor pollution is causing many premature deaths" (6). "The WHO estimated that 2.4 million people die prematurely every year due to fine particulates," with 67 percent of those deaths comes from indoor pollutants (52).
- "Drastic reductions in fish stocks are creating both economic losses and a loss of food supply" (6).
- "Inuit populations in the ... Arctic and Greenland have among the highest



exposures of POPs [Persistent Organic Pollutants] and mercury from a traditional diet...A sustainable lifestyle...is endangered as a result" (20). These contaminants are coming from "advanced" societies.

- Recent evidence of warming includes "a number of shrinking mountain glaciers, thawing permafrost, earlier breakup of river and lake ice, lengthening of mid- to high-latitude growing seasons, shifts of plant, insect and animal ranges, earlier tree flowering, insect emergence and egg laying in birds, land changes in precipitation patterns and ocean currents..." (59)
- "Water contaminated by microbes remains the greatest single cause of human illness and death on a human scale" (116). These illnesses and deaths are largely preventable.

(The entire report can be downloaded, for free, at <http://www.unep.org/geo/geo4/media/>) Analyses throughout the report, which was authored by 388 experts and scientists, "highlight rapidly disappearing forests, deteriorating landscapes, polluted waters and urban sprawl." Notwithstanding its startling claims, "the objective [of the report] is not to present a dark and gloomy scenario but an urgent call for action" (34).

Despite these pronouncements from such a prominent organization, I suspect that most readers didn't hear one lick about this report in the mainstream media. Why not? Well, perhaps it was considered less pressing than news about the fires in Southern California or the droughts in the south Eastern states. (Do you think it will receive coverage once these fires are contained or rains finally fall in Georgia?) Maybe the media is tired of "gloom and doom" news and wants to highlight positive things such

Figure 2.6 Amount of space required to transport the same number of passengers by car, bus or bicycle. Poster in city of Muenster Planning Office, August 2001)



as World Series sweeps or major upsets in college football. Whatever the reason, it strikes me a downright unimaginable that a report that took so much time and effort to put together by so many of the world's great minds on a subject of such grand importance (i.e., the future of the planet) would be given such little attention.

Given the lack of urgency communicated by our media, it is no wonder that the majority of us function as if everything is okay (or, at least, out of our control). What

should we expect from a media that exists largely to sell things—virtually all television revenue comes from selling advertising? Not much, I am afraid. And if the media, which is so powerful and influential in today's video era, fails to make adequate space/time for these critical news stories (perhaps because of profit-driven bottom lines), doesn't it make it more pressing that others of us act as messengers and speak out (perhaps scream) with increased vigor and outrage?

Would screaming, "Fire," work? It didn't seem to work for Howard Dean, the 2004 Democratic Presidential frontrunner who spoke with a bit too much energy once (the media said "screamed") and was quickly removed from serious contention. It doesn't seem to work for actors like Leonardo DiCaprio whose movie *11th Hour* seems to be fading quickly into the "trash heap" of unsuccessful (in revenue terms) films (despite its strong reviews and powerful messages). Maybe "screaming" will be interpreted more along the lines of a *Peter and the Wolf* classic (oddly enough, a work of art to which I owe my name).

On the other hand, some people have been quite successful "screaming." For decades, Wangari Maathai has been speaking out about the importance of trees and largely because of this, in 2004, she became the first environmentalist to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Al Gore, former US senator from Tennessee and Vice President under Bill Clinton, has also been speaking loudly for some time on the issue of climate change. His efforts and others were also recently recognized with the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. Julia Butterfly Hill, post a life-threatening car accident and subsequent

time spent atop a redwood named Luna, has been speaking passionately about the environmental troubles that we face and help found the organization, Circle of Life Foundation (circleoflifefoundation.org). She is now one of the leading environmental ambassadors. So, before we so easily give up on the importance of speaking up, we should remember these leaders. Given the success that they are having, apparently someone is listening.

Also, there are organizations doing wonderful things to make the planet healthier, happier and supportive of life. Recently, the BBC (the British Broadcasting Corporation) released an incredibly beautiful documentary entitled *Planet Earth*, which presents an in-depth look at many regions of the world. (The photography and videography is so stimulating that you often forget that you are watching something on a screen.) I've seen the entire project (5 DVDs in total) selling in local stores. What a wonderful present this would make: it isn't every day that I recommend people buy something, so you better check this one out.

Other organizations tackling the problems we face with diligence, intelligence and hope include *Bioneers* (bioneers.org), *EarthRights International* (earthrights.org), and *Oxfam* (oxfam.org). These are only three of literally thousands of such organizations currently moving us in the right direction.

Proverbial fires are burning all around us. Isn't anyone of the following things sufficient to tell us this?

- Extinction rates are at least a hundred times greater than natural rates.
- Carbon dioxide is at its highest atmospheric levels in human existence.
- The 8 warmest years on record (consisting of 140+ years of data) have occurred in the

past ten years.

- 30+ intrastate armed conflicts currently "burn" across the planet.
- 1 billion people live on less than \$1 a day; 1+ billion people lack access to clean water.
- 800+ million people are chronically malnourished.
- Thousands of industrial chemicals are being produced and disseminated without sufficient tests for danger to humans or the environment.
- 3 million people die from water-borne diseases annually, most of them children under the age of five.

Yet, the lesson learned from the GEO-4 report is a profound one. If we spend the next 20 years doing what we have collectively done in the past 20, things will only get worse, perhaps much worse. As noted in the report, "The danger of [a balanced] no action needed yet approach is that millions of lives might be needlessly lost, human health impaired, or species made extinct" (472). Clearly, action is needed and it must be generated from the bottom up since our nation's leaders have had far too long to "hear the message" and remedy the problems. When will you scream, "Fire?"

What are you waiting for?
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Figure 8.5 Number of people affected by climate-related disasters in developing and developed countries

