

## ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

Peter Schwartzman

## What in the World is going on?

There is a lot happening on environmental fronts here in the United States. On the hopeful side, President Obama seems determined to subsidize renewable energy development and green jobs, thus, marking a major shift in U.S. policy. On the less welcome side, we've had a few crises recently. Three days before Christmas, the largest coal ash spill in our history occurred when over a billion gallons of this toxic end product of coal burning spread over a rural Tennessee county (so much for "clean" coal); by comparison, the Exxon Valdez spilled only one-tenth this amount of crude oil into Alaskan waters in 1989. On Christmas Day, an oil pipeline owned by ConocoPhillips burst causing ~95,000 gallons of crude to be released into the environment. To top it all off, we have the major salmonella outbreak in many processed peanut butter products resulting in one of the largest recalls ever (over 31 million pounds so far). These are important issues. All have significant implications for the future of our energy and food systems. Yet, while it is very important to keep up with domestic environmental happenings, it is equally important to keep abreast of events transpiring elsewhere.

The minute we leave the United States, the world becomes a foreign place to many of us. Partly this is by design. Our educational system spends much too little time on geography and international relations. Partly, it is a byproduct of never having been outside the U.S. before. Of those that have been to distant places, most probably spent their time doing touristy things. While one can learn a lot on such excursions, typically they shelter visitors from many things, making it difficult for them to understand the challenges faced by nations and people abroad. Another reason we are relatively ignorant about goings-on elsewhere is the enormous size of the Earth. Even those that have been deeply engaged with another part of the world, perhaps through missionary work or the Peace Corps, have only been exposed to one sector of this vast planet. For all these reasons, it is imperative that we make an extra effort not only to expose ourselves to things happening far away but to understand our connection to any underlying problems.

When one finally looks out at the world and its nearly 200 countries, one begins to get a glimpse of how much is going on. While it is impossible here to cover the entire planet, there are a couple happenings that will highlight both the connection these situations have with us as well as the urgent need for more awareness and engagement with what otherwise might be considered foreign affairs. Before elaborating, let's speculate on what types of problems might exist. Consider our lives. What is characteristic of them, in contrast to the lives of other people on the globe? One of the more telling differences between us and others is that we hoard/consume resources voraciously. Such consumption might be beneficial to others or it might be detrimental, but, either way, we should expect it to have a considerable impact. We only need to look at some of the more obvious resources feeding our consumerism to learn a few important lessons.

Oil is something we use in abundance. Our vehicles are filled with it, our farm implements run on it, and even our clothes and furniture is made with it (i.e., plastics and fibers derived from petroleum). Among countries with at least five million people, the U.S. trails behind only Canada for the honor of highest oil consuming nation (on a per person basis). In gross terms, the U.S. leads the pack by far; we use more than 20 million barrels of oil a day (a barrel is 42 gallons); the next closest country in the world is China (at 6.4 million) and Japan (at 5.6 million). Where we find oil being extracted, not surprisingly, we find repercussions.

Though not one of the top importers of petroleum to the U.S., Ecuador, still sends

around 80 million barrels (annually) this way. Oil has been coming out of this equatorial nation for quite some time. Its extraction, however, may not have been conscientious of the indigenous inhabitants or the environment. At least this is what is being alleged in one of the most important legal battles taking place in the environmental arena right now. Plaintiffs from rural northeastern Ecuador are suing U.S. oil giant Chevron for toxic dumping they claim was done in their region by the oil giant Texaco (who merged with Chevron in 2001) over a nearly thirty year period starting in the mid-1960's. This lawsuit, known as *Aguinda v. ChevronTexaco*, which began litigation over fifteen years ago and consists of forty-eight inhabitants of the Oriente region suing on behalf of 30,000 other residents, has the potential to be a historic case. The oil waste byproducts dumped into thousands of open pits have dispersed into surrounding areas and left soils poisonous, drinking water toxic, and the fish highly contaminated, contend the plaintiffs. The stakes are high not only because the actions of a multi-national corporation are under critical examination here but the damage and destruction associated with the lingering pollution is so grand—for instance, cancer rates are very high among people living near the pits.

If the plaintiffs win the case, it could lay the groundwork for additional cases regarding other key contaminated zones throughout the world. Yet, independent of what the courts eventually settle, two observations are glaring. First, if in fact a company is responsible for this major toxic release, how long does it take for them to pay for their reckless disregard for life, assuming they will be forced to pay something? (And does paying a fine solve the problem or recompense the victims?) Second, are those who used this oil (to commute or dress up) somehow complicit in these tragic episodes? If so, what price should they pay? And if not, why not? (For those that remain skeptical about the likelihood that a multinational corporation would disregard environmental laws and not respect the dignity and health of indigenous people, I urge you to investigate this case more closely as well as a similar case which was settled out of court in 2004 which involved the alleged crimes committed by another oil giant Unocal in association with the building of a pipeline in the Asian country of Burma.)

Our use of petroleum has indirectly spawned other problems as well. We've been using gasoline for a long time—ever since the oil-powered military ships of World War I helped combustion engines displace electric cars early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. But coincident with this shift, a very dangerous material became synonymous with gasoline from the 1920's on: Lead (well, actually, tetraethyl lead, a lab produced variety that corporations could patent—making it an incredibly lucrative—and exclusive—additive to automotive gasoline.) For over sixty years, we pumped leaded gasoline into our cars despite the recognition by many scientists that it was highly toxic and detrimental to neurological function and mental development, especially in children. We also added lead to paint until the late 1970's. Though now banned in the United States for use in gasoline and paint, the lead industry is still doing quite well. Apparently new markets for lead had to be found (similar to how U.S. cigarette companies broadened international efforts after laws and cultural shifts in U.S. reduced the pool of potential smokers).

The biggest lead smelter in the United States is located in Herculaneum, Missouri (~30 miles south of St. Louis). After more than a decade on the Environmental Protection Agency's probation list for violations of emissions, Doe Run, the company that runs the plant, felt compelled (by increased media and public

pressure) to purchase over a hundred homes and remove contaminated soil from several hundred neighboring yards. This not-so-well-known company operates many factories around the world and its affiliate company, Doe Run Peru, operates one of the most notorious metal smelting plants in the world. Located in La Oroya, Peru, high in the Andes, one cannot imagine how polluted this community is and how devastated the area has become. Once a valley surrounded by green pastures, now the people are sick, the animals are dying, the river is devoid of fish, and the land is highly contaminated with poisons. The local people, who number about 30,000 (roughly the same population as Galesburg), are poor and have few options. Must they sacrifice their bodies, their minds, and their communities, for the right to live? Are there any lawsuits pending in this situation? None that I am aware of. And as long as these plants can operate with minimal human and environmental concern, and as long as we keep buying copper and lead (which is still allowed in the U.S. for propeller planes and NASCAR race cars!), we can be sure that the children and families of La Oroya will continue to suffer mercilessly. Herculaneum's example teaches us that even the U.S. EPA can drag its feet for years before doing something about major lead contamination. The La Oroya situation indicates how despicable environmental conditions can be in other parts of the world as a result of refining metals that are used elsewhere. Both episodes suggest that by permitting toxic pollutants to be emitted somewhere, we open the possibility that they will be accepted everywhere.

What else do we have a lot of in the United States? How about cell phones, computers, and video game consoles? Among countries with at least ten million people, the U.S. is third in computers per capita. We have about one computer for every 1.3 person. Why is this a problem, shouldn't every one have use of a computer? Well, computers have lots of toxic materials in them (e.g., lead, mercury, cadmium, brominated flame retardants, beryllium, and many plastic derivatives). These chemicals come out of the ground (i.e., they are mined) somewhere. Not surprisingly they are usually extracted where it is most expedient (economically) to do so. This race to the economic bottom driven by our insatiable need for electronic gadgets has serious ramifications.

One rare metal found in electronic equipment is coltan. According to the U.S. Geologic Survey, about 25 percent of all tantalum (a metallic element extracted from coltan ore) comes from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in central Africa. According to several international agencies, Congolese coltan brings such a high price in the marketplace (anywhere from \$50-\$300 per pound) that it has fueled major fighting and human rights violations in eastern Congo (which has spilled over into neighboring countries); similar conflicts centered on prized gems found their way into the recent movie, *Blood Diamond* (2006). Additionally, the mining practices utilized in these areas are notorious for destroying the inner forest which further reduces already sparse habitat for the endangered mountain gorillas found there. So who would have thought that the use of computers, cell phones and video games might be connected with the murder of poor and desperate humans and the extinction of one of the few remaining primates?

So is everything so doom and gloom? Absolutely not. There are many positive things happening. In fact, according to environmental guru, Paul Hawken, the "largest social movement in history is [underway], restoring grace, justice, and beauty to the world." His book, *Blessed Unrest*, lays out the history and foundations for this movement—which brings traditional environmentalists

together with social reformers, human rights advocates, teachers, agriculturists, and spiritual leaders. In a presentation he gave at the 2006 Bioneers Conference, Paul so poignantly communicated the immense scope of this movement through a video that scrolled through a list of organizations found throughout the world that are working for "social and environmental justice." According to his calculations, this list, undoubtedly incomplete, could scroll at a leisurely pace for more than four days before reaching its end! So where are these many bright spots? Short on space, I'll list a few:

- Kenyans have been planting trees for decades. Starting in 1977, "The Greenbelt Movement" ([www.greenbeltmovement.org](http://www.greenbeltmovement.org)) continues to empower people worldwide to understand and engage directly with their local environment as a means to improving their lives.

- In South Africa, starting in 1995 and continuing to this day, Working for Water (a public works project; [www.dwaf.gov.za/wfw/](http://www.dwaf.gov.za/wfw/)) has employed many people in the activity of cutting down non-native trees in order to increase stream flow in rivers.

- In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Middle East's largest solar power plant is in the process of being built. Masdar City, considered by some at "most ambitious sustainable development in the world today," will serve as its home as well as residence to 50,000 people. Masdar is planning to be carbon neutral and cars will **not** be allowed ([www.masdaruae.com](http://www.masdaruae.com)).

- Belgium's first national park opened in 2006 due to the persistent efforts of Ignace Schops and a consortium of groups, including the nation's largest coal company. Hoge Kempen, as the park is named, will be a wonderful site to visit for generations to come.

- In Oaxaca, Mexico, the Center for Integral Small Farmer Development in Mixteca (CEDICAM) has been working tirelessly to renew a region formerly characterized by highly disturbed land with rich, fertile soil. Using traditional techniques, such as planting trees and digging ditches, these indigenous people located in southern Mexico are reconnecting the local farmers with sustainable practices. Currently more than 1,500 farmers are involved in this project.

- The nation of Bhutan, wedged between India and China, continues using "Gross National Happiness" as a measure of the health of society rather than strict economic metrics (such as Gross National Product) as used in most other countries. Its respect and valuation of its rich ecological resources (over 70 percent of the nation is covered by native forest and shrubland) serves as a model for other countries to emulate.

- Denmark recently approved a huge off-shore wind turbine park. Once completed, this project will provide energy for ~400,000 homes. This serves as a sustainable alternative to off-shore drilling which appears to be U.S. policy even under President Barack Obama leadership.

A lot is going on, much under our radar. Our lives are inextricably linked to major environmental problems in many parts of the world. However, not all is gloom. If we become informed and act on this knowledge, we can build a better future for all.

*Peter Schwartzman (email: [wordnerdauthor@gmail.com](mailto:wordnerdauthor@gmail.com)) is associate professor and chair of the Department of Environmental Studies at Knox College. Father to two amazing girls, Peter hopes that their lives will be lived on a less-toxic, more just, more loving planet. A nationally-ranked Scrabble® junkie, he is also the founder and maintainer of websites dedicated to peace and environmental well-being ([www.onehuman.org](http://www.onehuman.org) & [www.blackthornhill.org](http://www.blackthornhill.org)) as well as cofounder of The Center ([thecenteringalesburg.org](http://thecenteringalesburg.org)).*