What is the grassroots' and environmental establishment's main failure?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
27 February 2008

Culture Change Letter #179

A survey on skin color of environmental activists was reported in the daily Oregonian early this year, sparking commentary in the online Daily Grist. These articles had a reasonable social-justice perspective, with a Grist quote telling us that color-coordination will "perform miracles." One essay's sub-heading: "The movement's greatest challenge is its own lack of diversity". Really?

While it's crucial that people of color be better represented in environmental campaigns and organizations, there is a deeper issue that if not dealt with will make moot anyone's skin color on a dead planet. It's hard to imagine there's something worse than racism -- who would want to live in a color-cleansed world with oppression, even if comfortable and surrounded by biodiversity?

The articles expose the fact that people of color make up only 11 percent of the staff and 9 percent of the boards of member organizations, even though states such as California have a majority population of non-caucasian. And, the articles' argument that diversity-improvement would go a long way to improving environmental advocacy's success is well taken.

The synopsis, from Grist:

When it comes to race, the actual color of the green movement is decidedly white. According to a survey conducted from 2004 to 2006, more than one-third of U.S. mainstream green groups and one-fifth of eco-related government agencies have no nonwhite staff members. Minorities tend to join up with grassroots environmental-justice groups, leaving mainstream groups open to the consistent criticism that they are elitist. And while environmentalism was undeniably elitist in its beginnings -- in the early 1900s, the movement was led by whites trying to protect wild land and animals from the masses -- at this point, surveys indicate that nonwhites care just as much about eco-issues as whites do, from climate change to deforestation to pesticide use to air pollution. Success in the ongoing effort to bring everyone together will get results, says activist Charles Jordan: "Once society sees this is really going to be color-coordinated, I think we're going to perform miracles."

What is the agenda of a diversity-oriented activist? That depends on the person. If the visionary agenda is to pass regulations and expand the job base, while only fining corporations for their ongoing pollution (aimed at poor minorities more than richer populations), then the movement is spinning its wheels and it props up the status quo until general collapse. So what is the most effective vision, and what needs to happen for it to take precedence?

What I call "funded environmentalism" is almost completely tied to promoting an unrealistic promise of extending status-quo economics, with little mention of upending the social structure or losing our consumer lifestyle. Such an approach sounds wrong, and would be vigorously denied by the struggling nonprofit groups. But in my 20 year career as a grassroots environmental activist and fundraiser, patterns have emerged clearly.

Whether an environmental group is grassroots with a representative mix of staffers and volunteers, or based in Washington, DC with good salaries for the white folks running it, a strong commonality in the message and mission is the overwhelming emphasis on the techno-fix for solving the crisis of pollution and climate chaos. If I'm accurate, and those groups' environmentalist approach is off-base, we are poorly served and betrayed in having faith that activists are doing battle for us and our descendants.

For at this juncture in society's development, it is clear that fundamental change in the way we treat the Earth -- and in how many people are involved -- is overdue. Reforming a system based on growth and material wealth, while trying not to upset the apple cart (laced with rotten and sprayed apples) is to throw a drowning person a Life-Saver -- the little candy kind.

Social justice has so dominated the discourse and policies of the environmental movement that the Earth is often put second in priorities, as in concerns about energy -- that it must be plentiful for poor people now and always. Or, that if women and people of color are well represented in meetings and organizations, the health of the planet automatically makes progress. But, as Earth First!ers used to say, there's no social justice on a dead planet. I know this is a divisive

issue, and political correctness exists for excellent reasons. But we must all admit that there is eventually a collision between prioritizing the rights and needs of people, in our unequal and unjust society, and the rights and needs of the Earth, if the goals are not consistent with true sustainability and survival.

Ecologically, our failure is clear.

How we can then conveniently ignore carrying capacity, and cling to unfounded hope that there will not be a major, historical disruption of business-as-usual, makes no sense. But that's where the money still speaks. Being "positive" and "hopeful" means offering "solutions" instead of sober analysis and looking at options for survival. Funders invariably have a stake in the stock market and they want to maintain their "privilege" and not become prematurely vulnerable to deprivation and social havoc. So, we keep right on going with hopes that things can change in an orderly fashion -- if we can just get a better president elected (a woman or a non-white would be perfect). But, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are less than actual ecologists able to give us the straight of it, whether by their inability to grasp the science or reluctance to step on the powerful toes of their backers.

We've seen the health of the Earth deteriorate steadily, despite the victories claimed by the big environmental groups, and despite heroic activism by community-oriented individuals and organizations. The seas are dying as they warm and acidify, laden with nonbiodedradable plastic particles that kill and taint fish. Carbon in the air increases beyond our level of fossil-fuels emissions and deforestation, thanks to positive feedback loops achieved to accelerate sea-level rise, melting of tundra, etc. In the clearest failure of environmental reformism, we saw the energy-efficiency advances from the 1970s onward enable more growth of the economy and energy use overall, and the canceling out of per-capita conservation improvements. Take a look around -- we still see most drivers alone in their cars, and land-use continuing to treat our Earth as the cash cows of aggressive individuals who can subvert well-intended government protection for the commons.

As long as oil and cash are available, and people do not have to drop their routines on their little treadmills, living within nature's wise limits for sustainability and sharing will be put off and resisted vociferously. Whether it is our cultural programming or the demands of our economic and political masters, we are caught in the gap we can call "Inaction for short term survival." Today's economics, that demand slavish performance to pay big bills and meet others' expectations, means we are building up the size of our debacle ahead: the house of cards is being fed gasoline that will combust in a big, unpleasant surprise. Energy and materials for our way of life will mostly vanish, and we will all be trying to fall back on local resources and ways of subsistence that we once had with the traditions we rejected in our march of "progress."

The environmental movement has to do more on a number of fronts, and peak-oil preparedness must be among the top priorities in an integrated, Earth-first approach.

* * * * *

Further Reading

"How to diversify environmentalism?:
The movement's greatest challenge is its own lack of diversity" by Marcelo Bonta, 02 Jan 2008

grist.org

"The Skin We're In:
U.S. green movement is decidedly white",
29 Jan 2008

grist.org

"In Oregon and U.S., green groups are mostly white:
Ethnicity - Environmental leadership across the nation has little diversity, which two Portlanders work to change" by Scott Learn, January 27, 2008

oregonlive.com

Jan Lundberg publishes Culturechange.org, and is involved in projects such as banning plastics and reviving sail

transport. He formerly ran Lundberg Survey, an oil statistics firm that predicted the Second Oil Shock in 1979.

* * * * *

Jan Lundberg's March 4 interview on Tomorrow Matters -- on peak oil and related topics -- can be heard on Culture Change at

culturechange.org (13 megabyte MP3 file.)
Host Deborah Lindsay's website is

deborahlindsay.com