Countering the Pervasive, Abominable Disgrace: Lethal Artificial Surfaces

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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"I would rather have ass fault than asphalt!"

The artificial environment hasn't yet been questioned by environmentalists. They accept it pretty much as is -- they and it are wedded to the notions of progress, science, and "Better living through chemistry" (Dupont's old slogan appropriated by acid-head hippies). When a grassroots wing of the environmental movement went after road building and pavement (tarmac) two decades ago, it was quite fringy for mainstream enviros. Then when we went after plastics a decade ago, this too was considered "out there," and kept low on the list of concerns for the average campaigner.

Fortunately, both plastics and endless road building -- and even depaving -- are by now familiar issues that are at least visible. However, they address the uncomfortable and almost taboo problem of lifestyle. Cars, the petroleum infrastructure (e.g., plastics and lubricants in vast quantities) and economic growth have not been fully challenged by environmentalists. Western Civilization is based on never-ending expansion -- at best a questionable idea -- yet, some of our finest minds such as NASA's James Hansen uphold the legacy of civilization as the main reason to stop sea-level rise.

As Earth's benign ecosystem is clearly unravelling, according to scientific findings and common-sense observation, we need to get closer to the root. But in doing so, mainstreamers can become disturbed and dismissive. This is best typified when Native American traditional culture and beliefs are pointed to as this land's only proven model of sustainability. Many modern consumers know that the "Indians" revered the land and could not relate to owning it, because other species had an equal place with humans on the Earth. Plus, spirit or spirits were part of daily reality. But Indian ways and ideas are still ignored or put down as unworkable relics of a lost past.

If we want to overcome this and survive our unnatural culture, and "get ourselves back to the garden" (Woodstock), we need to to better grasp sustainability. An important step we moderns might take is to compare today's landscape and built environment to the Indians' managed wilderness model.

The latter was all but obliterated by white civilization that has thrived on the proliferation of artificial surfaces, extractive forestry and industrial agriculture. Recently we have begun to awaken to the errors of modern ways, such as by reviving fire-forestry. Through this essay let us focus on artificial surfaces and land use, and see how this relates to healing both the ecosystem as well as our bodies.

Besides the toxic asphalt from your friendly oil refinery's bottom of the barrel, concrete or cement paves over our world and also makes for buildings, bridges, nuclear power plants, ad infinitum. Concrete and cement require huge greenhouse gas-generation globally, and they don't even hold up as well as wood, over time, as Alice Friedemann showed recently in her article "A Century from Now Concrete Will be Nothing But Rubble."

As if the picture could get worse, there's also plastic surfaces and objects. The most egregious is the plastic astroturf strewn around to replace living lawns. 124 million square feet of toxic plastic turf are added to the U.S. landscape annually. The "non-point source" runoff of this junk ends up in valued bodies of water, just as poison drippings do from motor vehicles. Yet some prefer this to -- oh no! -- horse droppings, as part of the price of transport.

At the top of any short list of petroleum "products" destroying life and beauty, must be the plastic trash littering the oceans. Plastic debris -- impossible to gather and remove when in its most common, tiny form -- is a perfect example of using the Earth as a toxic cesspool. At least the oceans cannot be paved, and an attraction of sail transport is that it

uses the ocean surface as is, with no engines necessary.

Just because modern, mega-technologies -- involving pollutants that don't biodegrade -- are possible and desired for mega-profits doesn't mean they should be allowed. Haven't we as a species by now fully exercised our "right" to pollute and expand, having stolen vast amount of habitat from defenseless species? Over 40% of the surface of the Earth is taken by cities and farms. The U.S. has much more paved area than official wilderness. But the growing number of humans and their "right" to manipulate nature are almost never reckoned with politically.

A Personal Skirmish in the Daily Petroleum War

A plastic surface can be a planter or container. In late autumn I banged my foot on one such manufactured artifact of our amazing global warming-generation. Crunching my toes would not have been so painful, but I had previously injured a foot ligament -- thanks to asphalt. Remember, it's not our fault, it's asphalt (ass fault). I would rather have an ass fault than asphalt. How about you?

I had fallen off my bike because the chain slipped at a sensitive time, and I was top-heavy with a backpack because I was on a job. So I tumbled down and sprained my foot. If the bike lanes in these United Paved Precincts were more like Europe's -- removed from cars, usually elevated -- I would have been more secure at the moment and place of my accident, and there wouldn't have been any hazard when the chain slipped.

If our bike lanes weren't just pseudo bike lanes, there would also be more pretty women 'a peddling, whom a guy like me enjoys for biking company. With intelligent land-use, bike riders get quite numerous, and commuting by bike is no problema. The best European bike lanes and their popularity -- especially in northern Europe -- are enjoyed by those consciously living more sustainably. For outside the U.S. there is much more respect for the scientific consensus that we need to cut back emissions as far as necessary to fight the climate tipping points now being reached.

My sprain didn't seem to bad at all at first, but I should have known a few things in advance for recovery. One principle, with an injury on the bottom of my foot, was that I could not safely or painlessly press my foot down on pavement of any kind, including hard floors, even with shoes. With any shoe or a boot cast, there's more discomfort and risk than when barefoot. I must spend more time at the sea on the sand. I have learned my principles the hard way, double meaning intended. Now you know why my banging my foot on the planter was an extra drag.

Until that latest mishap, I was just moments before crawling around with glee on the depaved back yard in the moonlight. The crawling started out as a necessity to fetch my guitar, because I was going back inside my home after soaking my foot in hot water and epsom salts. It had been a relatively balmy evening, after a glorious global warming day. But with the crutches in use, I could not bring the guitar. So I brought it in by crawling, not too far at all in my very small yard and home. I was really happy to discover crawling, to toughen up my hands and upper body, and give my knees a tough massage in the process.

So here we have twin villains from alleged oil reality, the asphalt and the plastic surfaces and objects -- compared to what benign alternative? Would you settle for natural earth and rocks and trees to bump your sprained foot on? And in a

natural environment, let's say pristine, I would not have first gotten hurt on the asphalt.

In between these extremes -- the artificial world of industrial hell, or the garden of eden, or something -- lies the sustainable development scene. How about an ecovillage? Would it have a fantastic bakery for our delight? Would there be a sailing dock a bike ride's away? Suffice to say that in such an environment without urban blight, there would be fewer hazards, such as those made by oil refineries. Instead of a plastic planter I might have bumped into a barrel, or a plain ol' plant, in or near the ecovillage.

Not being physically able to work for The Man in some capacity leaves one with few options these days. Just like when you're sick or in need of resting at home, the freedom to subsist without employment is mostly nonexistent. To take the time to heal from petroleum related injuries is sort of ironic, when one is forced by a petroleum-dominated system to work hard. And harder, with toxic and injurious side effects such cancer. The biggest effect is from greenhouse gases. So it's a vicious circle. But when the oil's gone, and when much depaving (a permaculture practice) have improved the landscape along with the hydrology, the world will be a safer and more convivial place. Like in northern Europe. But there is real doubt that today's debt-based, affluent European lifestyle is sustainable.

At least there's a growth industry there: sail transport. The main players include the brigantine Tres Hombres and its able community, along with Guillaume Le Grand's T.O.W.T. But as a sailor at sea, one needs steady nimble feet. Using your sea legs on a ship is a delight, and essential to keep one's balance. Therefore if I look forward to getting back on the water I must be fully able. With little thanks to the standard medical approach that I used -- that delayed my sprain from healing -- I'm getting back on track.

One last point about dangerous artificial surfaces: It is the paved surfaces, including rooftops, that are the source of the urban heat island effect. Trees and water cool the land and air; asphalt doesn't. So, Duh, let's get it together people: paint roofs white, plant trees, shrubs and ground cover like crazy, depave, and stop building mega-houses. Turn the driveways into food gardens now to enhance local self-sufficiency and create lady bug habitat.

See you out in the garden or the garden to be. We can help each other out. One could, for example offer fasting advice in exchange for getting some care-giving for moving around gingerly with a healing foot, in the house and garden. That's community: mutual aid. If not, oy veh.

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This report was revised and completed on January 29, 2013.
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Further reading:

A Century from Now Concrete Will be Nothing But Rubble - new report from Alice Friedemann

www.plasticfieldsforNever.org The problem with the unhealthful, costly astroturf scam

Hazardous chemicals in synthetic turf materials and their bioaccessibility in digestive fluids. Journal of Exposure Science and Environmental Epidemiology, 2008, Zhang J, I-K Han, L Zhang and W Crain

Health Care Tribe: elder care "insurance" - Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter, 2002 ("Intriguing" - Daniel Quinn)

Major climate changes looming - San Francisco Chronicle,
Carolyn Lochhead, January 27, 2013

Algalita Marine Research Foundation - revealing the plastic plague, led by the intrepid Capt. Charles Moore, author of Plastic Ocean

Depave.org - based in Portland, Ore. (Paveland, Ore-is-Gone)

Sail Transport Network

Listen to The Depavers and their eco-rock, e.g., Have a Global Warming Day (played on NPR and CNN-International).