

TIME FOR CHANGE

by Paul Donahue

Our economic system doesn't work. It doesn't work for the majority of the world's people, and it certainly doesn't work for the environment.

While I am considered far from wealthy by U.S. standards, I have a very comfortable lifestyle. I live in a house where I can stay warm and dry. I have plenty of good food to eat, and plenty of clothes to wear. I am sitting in a padded, swivel chair, and typing on a fancy laptop computer. If I need a break from work, I can pull one of thousands of books from my shelves or watch television or a movie. For me, personally, at least on the surface, our economic system would appear to work quite well. The same can be said for my family and friends.

I have spent much of my adult life working in the developing countries of South and Central America. Compared to the lifestyles of most of the people I have encountered there, my own lifestyle would have to be described as nothing short of opulent. One incident illustrating this is seared in my memory forever. Back in the early 1990's my wife Teresa and I were directing the construction of a canopy walkway in the Amazon rainforest of northeastern Peru. We lived for ten months at a time in one of the very simple rooms in the lodge that housed tourists who came to visit the walkway. One morning one of our local crew came to our room to get a piece of equipment he needed for the day's work. Our room was crammed with the field clothes, books, tree climbing gear, and photographic and tape-recording equipment that we needed, or felt we needed, for the canopy walkway construction and bird research we were doing. When our worker walked in, his first time in our room, he was taken aback, his eyes roving around for a couple of moments. When he finally spoke, the first words out of his mouth were, "*Parece una tienda*" (It looks like a store). To say the least, his own home would have looked very different.

I am very grateful for my time in Latin America for many reasons. I have had more amazing wildlife experiences there than I can remember and traveled through beautiful, wild landscapes unmarred by civilization. It has also given me an important perspective on everyday life here in the U.S., making me realize how privileged Americans are, at least those of the middle and upper classes, to live in a country where their needs and wants are so readily met. Simultaneously, it has made me acutely aware that the high standard of living we enjoy here in the U.S. is only possible because of the misery that has been inflicted upon people in far away lands. We might not want to see it, but it is not difficult to see if we care to look. For us to live the life we do in the U.S. means that...

- The Ogoni people of the Niger Delta live in a toxic ecosystem horribly polluted by endless oil spills;

- The peoples of Iraq and Afghanistan live in lands that have been ravaged by resource wars for decades;
- Like the Ogoni, the indigenous peoples of eastern Ecuador live in an area badly polluted by oil spills;
- Citizens of Chinese cities live with toxic levels of air pollution so we can have the consumer goods they produce in their factories;
- People of the Democratic Republic of Congo suffer armed conflict fueled by Coltan (Columbite–Tantalite), a vital component in all our cell phones and computers, and many other electronic devices. Thousands have been killed and mutilated so we can send text messages anytime from anywhere;
- First Nations peoples in Alberta, Canada are suffering what has been called a “slow industrial genocide” - the toxic contamination and environmental degradation of the tar sands development, the largest and dirtiest industrial project on the planet. As a result of the tar sands, Canada has now become the biggest foreign supplier of oil to the U.S.
- Mexicans living in the *maquiladora* zone along the Mexico-U.S. border suffer the tremendous toxic contamination that came with the passage of NAFTA as U.S. corporations escaped south across the border to Mexico and its lax environmental safeguards;
- River dwellers across gold-mining regions of the Amazon Basin suffer the effects of mercury contamination so we can have gold for our jewelry and computers.
- Environmentalists in Brazil are being murdered at the rate of almost two per week. Brazil has become the most dangerous country in the world for environmentalists, with more than 450 murders of activists over the past decade. Most of the killings have been connected to disputes over the control and ownership of land, and mostly about wealthy landowners wanting to be able to graze more cattle to supply the endless and growing demand from industrialized countries for cheap beef. Small landowners, indigenous groups, and the environmentalists, not to mention the rainforest, suffer as a result.

The list of abuses against people around the world goes on and on and on. At least as long as that list is the list of offenses our economic system is committing against nature. I am a naturalist and an environmentalist, so I am most disturbed by the effect that capitalism is having on the environment. The statistics are staggering....

- 8 million metric tons of plastic go into the oceans every year.
- Over 4 billion pounds of toxic chemicals are released by industry into the U.S environment each year.
- Worldwide, approximately 5.6 billion pounds of toxic pesticides are dumped on the environment each year.
- Approximately 706 million gallons of waste oil enter the oceans every year. In 2010, BP’s *Deepwater Horizon* disaster alone spilled 170 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

- Due to overfishing, 3/4 of the world's fish stocks are being harvested faster than they can reproduce. Eighty percent are already fully exploited or in decline. Ninety percent of all large predatory fish - including tuna, sharks, swordfish, cod and halibut - are gone.
- 150 acres (61 hectares) of tropical rainforest are destroyed every minute of every day.
- At least 19% of the world's coral reefs are already dead, and no more than 46% of the remaining reefs can be considered to be in good health. A World Resources report states that all coral reefs will be gone by 2050 "if no actions are taken."
- The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) considers 1,199 species of mammals (26% of described species), 1,957 species of amphibians (41% of described species), and 1,373 species of birds (13% of described species) to be threatened with extinction. Estimates suggest that between 500 and 36,000 species of animals might be disappearing each year. (Yes, 500-36,000 is a wide range. Scientists don't even know how many species there are on Earth, never mind how many are disappearing annually.)

Just like the list of human suffering caused by capitalism, this list goes on and on. In the history of life on Earth there have been five previous major extinction events, where a large percentage of the living species at the time disappeared. All five of these major extinction events were caused by natural occurrences (if you consider volcanic activity and asteroids natural). The last one of these occurred 65 million years ago, with the extinction of the dinosaurs. We are now living through Earth's sixth major extinction event, with an extinction rate as high as the planet has seen. However, this extinction event is different from the others. It is occurring over hundreds of years not millions, and it is being caused by us. The current rapid extinction of species around the world is being driven by humans, in general, and, in particular, by capitalism. **OUR ECONOMIC SYSTEM IS CAUSING EXTINCTION!**

Our capitalist economic system doesn't work because it values money above all else. Vibrant and healthy ecosystems, happy and healthy people, clean food, water, and air, civil liberties - all the things that matter to most people - have no relevance or importance in capitalism. Most of the serious problems facing the world are the direct result of capitalism and its warped values. When the accumulation of capital is the ultimate goal and nothing else matters, what you get are unending resource wars, global warming, biodiversity loss, disappearance of wilderness, toxic pollution of the planet, steadily increasing cancer rates, massive poverty, and ever growing income gaps.

So many of the problems being worked on by so many civil society groups and individuals come down to a failure of our economic system. Whether you are trying to keep plastics out of the oceans, make healthcare affordable, or protect a mountain from an industrial wind plant, ultimately you are coming up against the forces of capitalism. Capitalism, in its endless search for profit, dictates one

course of action, while you are advocating for the exact opposite. You are seriously outgunned right from the outset.

Back when President Calvin Coolidge said, “The business of government is business, he meant that business should be left alone, unregulated, to operate and make a profit. Today, Coolidge’s statement has been taken to an entirely different level, with the line between corporations and government fuzzy, where it exists at all. Before its meaning was twisted, the original definition of the term “fascism” was the merging of corporate and state power. Capitalism by itself can be an extremely malevolent force. When you link corporate capitalism with government power, as in the near seamless blend that we now have here in the U.S., you end up with a truly toxic entity.

Before meaningful change can happen, corporate capitalism and government need to be de-linked. The legalized bribery that passes for our electoral process, ratified by the U.S. Supreme Court, needs to be reversed. Corporate money - all of it - every damn penny - needs to be removed from the political process. Until that happens, the politicians will be working for the corporations, not the people. It is just that simple.

Corporations also need to be thoroughly exorcised from every regulatory agency (FDA, EPA, FCC, etc.), government office, and department that has anything whatsoever to do with policies that impact corporations - and at all levels, local, state and national. The revolving door between corporations and government needs to be not only closed, but dynamited. Abraham Lincoln spoke of a government of, by, and for the people, not a government of, by, and for the corporations. They are not the same thing. What is good for corporations is frequently not good for the people, and certainly not for the planet.

Even the radical and difficult act of de-linking corporations and government likely would not be enough to correct the excesses of capitalism. Capitalism is predicated on endless growth, and in the words of famed environmentalist Edward Abbey, “Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.” As has been said many times by many people, you can not have endless growth on a finite planet. It is a physical impossibility. Capitalism has no automatic shut-off valve, nothing built into the ideology stating when enough is enough, so in the course of attempting the impossible, capitalism will turn the planet into a wasteland. All we have to do is look around. Despite overwhelming scientific evidence of impending ecological disaster, on the land and in the oceans, capitalism keeps us firmly on the path to self-destruction.



If that is the case, then serious environmentalists need to start thinking about total system change. WHEN YOUR ECONOMIC SYSTEM IS CAUSING A PLANETARY LEVEL EXTINCTION EVENT, IT'S PROBABLY TIME FOR A DIFFERENT ECONOMIC SYSTEM. We need to face the fact that what we have been doing so far is not working, and that we are losing, in a big way. Maybe there needs to be a violent upheaval, maybe not. Maybe change can be achieved one local organic garden at a time. I don't know, but I am reasonably sure that a radical change in thinking and in our economic system is going to be required if we, as a species, are to hold onto a reasonably survivable planet.

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