

AJES

Adirondack Journal of
Environmental Studies

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MISSION STATEMENT

The *Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies* (AJES) exists to foster a dialogue about the broad range of issues that concern the Champlain-Adirondack Biosphere Reserve.

AJES serves to bridge the gaps among academic disciplines and among researchers and practitioners devoted to understanding and promoting the development of sustainable communities, both human and wild.

The journal purposefully avoids serving as a vehicle for any single or special point of view. To the contrary, in searching for common ground AJES welcomes variety and a broad spectrum of perspectives from its contributors.

CONTRIBUTING TO AJES

We encourage the submission of manuscripts, reviews, photographs, artwork and letters to the editor. For additional information please visit the AJES website at www.ajes.org/ or contact Gary Chilson at chilsog@paulsmiths.edu or 518-327-6377.

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PREROGATIVE

Why We See the Trees Instead of the Forest

By GARY CHILSON
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Ever since Rachel Carson's eye-opening and chilling vision of a Spring without birdsong, Americans have devoted a tremendous effort, at great expense, to save the environment. As each new threat or problem emerged, we tried to correct it. There are now literally tens of thousands of laws and hundreds of thousands of regulations devoted to protecting one aspect or another of the environment. Nevertheless, the natural world and its life-support functions are still very much in jeopardy. As our population and industrial output continues to grow, the threats to sustaining our society continue to mount.

The trouble is that we have been focusing on the trees instead of the forest and many even think we've gone too far in this direction. They claim that our piecemeal regulatory approach has created a green bureaucracy of monstrous proportions and tremendous coercive power without solving the problem. But most of us actually prefer to see the trees, or individual environmental problems, as if they were separate, discrete problems we can solve through regulations rather than changing our economic system, the forest in this analogy.

The short description of the alternative approach is that we should use the government's enormous economic power to change the system rather than relying on its police power. One very significant and exciting example proposed has been called "tax shifting;" taxing bad things like pollution and shifting, dollar for dollar, away from taxing good things, like income from working for a living. The goal is to bring the prices we pay for goods and services into line with their true cost, including their environmental costs. It is not my intent, however, to devote this essay to a discussion of this alternative ap-

proach, as that has already been discussed in many books and articles elsewhere, and particularly in articles published in the *Journal of Ecological Economics* since the late 1980s. Instead, on this small platform, I shall explore the reasons why we prefer to see the trees instead of the forest — why we prefer to deal with our environmental problems as if they were unrelated and not in need of a systemic solution.

The simplistic answer is ignorance. The forest and even the trees, really, are invisible to the ignorant in their bliss. Public opinion polls rank environmental concerns far down the list of important issues in America. Thus, it's not surprising that very few politically involved people and even fewer politicians proportionately have any coherent understanding about the real depth and breadth of the systemic nature of our global environmental crisis let alone the need to deal with a systemic problem at the system level. It's just too far below their radar screens. But there are other reasons as well.

Some of us who aren't as ignorant ignore the forest and the need for systemic approaches because we can, even legitimately, under the mantle of scientific uncertainty. Reductionist science is good at analyzing the parts of a complex system but fails when we need to understand the interrelations of a synergistic whole. While science provides us with a powerful tool to examine individual, separate environmental problems, it is just a hammer, so of course everything begins to look like a nail. Consequently, we can always ignore the forest by falling back on the need for more research on trees.

Rene Dubois suggested another reason we don't see the forest for the trees. He thought that it was partly because of our "damnable adaptability." So far, the environmental crisis we have faced is a

slow-motion crisis. The death of a tree here and there is obvious but the slow death of the entire forest is harder to perceive. Even the most dramatic environmental problems we currently know about gradually appear rather than crashing in upon our consciousness. As our environment deteriorates, we adapt to the new conditions with ease. The ignorant even begin to think dirty air or water is the natural condition. It is amazing to me, for example, that so many people shrug off the fact that we shouldn't eat all the fish we catch in the Adirondacks because of mercury poisoning. So we eat store-bought factory-farm fish that has to be artificially colored to look right and move on with our lives. Why should we see the forest and deal with the disease when we can adapt to the symptoms?

I suppose, too, that it is useless to tell the very rich that the system that protects and expands their wealth is environmentally corrupt and needs to be changed. Vested interests would surely be at risk should we

address the environmental problem at the forest-level. Our powerful plutocrats resist every attempt to change the system and divert our efforts to piecemeal regulatory approaches that – surprise! – turn out to reduce competition and favor the largest corporations and their owners. I'm sure it will be too late if we have to wait until the wealthy see the forest.

In the end, however, and washing over all the other reasons, is fear. We prefer to deal with environmental problems as if they are all unrelated because we fear systemic approaches would change how and where we live, eat, work and play. Instead of eating meat two or three times a day we might find ourselves eating meat only on Sundays and special occasions. Moreover, perhaps all of our food would be organic and good for us. How could we live without junk food? Transportation costs might rise so high that globalization becomes just another archaic word we could ponder while we bicycle to work to produce for ourselves most of the few things we con-

sume or visit strange other cultures via virtual reality. The rich might not get richer but the poor do. Extractive industries might all but disappear as we reduce, reuse, and recycle nearly all of our material needs. Windmills might even be seen as kinetic sculptures we enjoy for their graceful beauty as well as their clean power.

A sustainable society would certainly be different than the unsustainable society we currently have, particularly in the developing nations whose people all think they have a right to live as lavishly as Americans. Fortunately, however, no one I respect advocates a revolution to establish it. Implementing systemic changes should be done gradually, a little tweak at a time. Over perhaps as much as a hundred years, the time it might take to stabilize population and completely replace our infrastructure, our many societies around the world would evolve into a sustainable global civilization. We can't possibly foresee how it will actually be, but by that time, of course, we would have adapted to it.

Adirondack Museum to hold "Living With Wilderness" symposium September 29

The Adirondack Museum at Blue Mountain Lake, New York will hold a public symposium, *Living With Wilderness: Community and Nature in the Adirondacks*, on September 29, 2006. The day-long program will be held at the Hilton Lake Placid Resort in Lake Placid, New York.

Since the 19th century, the Adirondack region has been at the center of national debate over whether to preserve or develop the environment. Today that continuing discussion will determine the future character of the region. The Adirondack Museum is the only regional institution that collects and interprets the history of the Adirondacks, the place and its people, in order to stimulate interest in and curiosity about the past and to provide perspective on its present and future. As a result, the museum has a remarkable opportunity to engage the public in exploring the changing interaction between people and the environment in the Adirondacks.

The symposium will bring together nationally recognized environmental historians to present papers based on current research *vis-à-vis* the intersection of cultural and natural histories.

William J. Cronon, Frederick Jackson Turner and Vilas Research Professor of History, Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin will be the keynote speaker for the symposium. Cronon's presentation is entitled: *At Home in the Wild: Conserving Not Just Land but Community Too*.

Speakers include: Phil Terrie, Bowling Green State University - *The Adirondacks and the Invention of American Wilderness*; Brian Donahue, Brandeis University - *Wildlands and Woodlands: The Relationship of Environmental History to Land Conservation Strategies in the Northeast*; David Foster, Harvard Forest - *A Vision for the New England Forest*; Karl Jacoby, Brown University - *American Thought and the Extinction of Species and Native Americans*; Richard Judd, University of Maine - *The Untilled Garden: Natural History and the Origins of Conservation in America, 1730 - 1850*; and Paul Sutter, University of Georgia - *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies: Georgia's Little Grand Canyon and Conservation in the South*.

The presentations will include panels whose members can expand on the special relevance of the academic papers to critical issues in the Adirondack region today. The panelists will include community planners, academics, advocates and other regional experts. A period devoted to audience questions and answers will follow each paper.

For additional information about the symposium or to receive registration materials, please contact:

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